

5-2015

"Helpin' a Buddy Out": Perceptions of Identity and Behavior Among Rural Straight Men That Have Sex With Each Other

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“HELPIN’ A BUDDY OUT”: PERCEPTIONS OF IDENTITY AND BEHAVIOR
AMONG RURAL STRAIGHT MEN THAT HAVE SEX WITH EACH OTHER

By

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B.A., California State University, Chico

A Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Arts

Department of Sociology
In the Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
May 2015

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RESEARCH PAPER APPROVAL

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A Research Paper Submitted in Partial

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For the Degree of

Master of Arts

In the field of Sociology

Approved by:

Dr. Chris Wienke, Chair

Dr. Kristen Barber

Graduate School
Southern Illinois University Carbondale
March 24, 2015

AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

TONY SILVA, for the Master of Arts degree in Sociology, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale

TITLE: “HELPIN’ A BUDDY OUT”: PERCEPTIONS OF IDENTITY AND BEHAVIOR AMONG RURAL STRAIGHT MEN THAT HAVE SEX WITH EACH OTHER

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Chris Wienke

I conducted semi-structured interviews with ten rural, white, straight-identified men who have sex with men to understand how they perceive their sexual identity and sexual behavior. All ten tell other people that they identify as straight, and eight actually identify as straight. Five experienced major changes to their attractions, indicating that, contrary to popular assumptions, men as well as women can experience sexual fluidity. There are six main reasons participants identify as straight: (1) rejection of a gay “lifestyle;” (2) participation in conventional family formation; (3) internalization of heteronormative messages during childhood; (4) religious struggles; (5) attractions to women; and/or (6) infrequency of male sexual contact. They experience sex with men in a variety of ways, many of which reinforce their straight identity: (1) relieving an “urge;” (2) masculine, emotions-free, heterosexual bonding; (3) acting on cravings for men in the absence of male attractions; (4) a means to act on attractions to men; and/or (5) a way to satisfy sexual “needs,” regardless of the partner’s gender. The results indicate that heterosexuality is performed rather than naturally enacted, and that it is a matrix of not only attractions and behaviors, but also interpretations and cultural frames.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Kristen Barber and Dr. Chris Wienke for their extremely helpful comments and suggestions at all stages of the research process.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A question emerges from sexuality survey research: Why are there greater proportions of men who report same-sex sexual behaviors or attractions than a sexual minority identity? General Social Survey data indicate that the proportion of men in the US who have ever had a same-sex sexual partner is about 6.4% (Wienke and Whaley 2015), though because most survey respondents substantially underreport same-sex sexual behavior (Coffman, Coffman, and Ericson 2013), its true prevalence could be higher. In any case, the latest National Survey of Family Growth (2011-2013) shows that approximately 8% of men 15-44 have some degree of same-sex attraction (NCHS 2014). Identification as gay or bisexual is far lower than the prevalence of either same-sex behavior or attraction: the 2013 National Health Interview Survey indicates 2.2% (Ward, Dahlhamer, Galinsky, and Joestl 2014), while a review of other studies estimates 3.6% (Gates 2011).

Research about sexual orientation and internalized homophobia help explain this gap. Sexual orientation is highly complex, which complicates sexual identity construction. Indeed, sexual orientation exists on a spectrum, rather than in discrete categories (Savin-Williams 2014). Further, there are several aspects of it that are related but distinct (Savin-Williams 2014), including sexual attraction, emotional attraction, and sexual behavior, and rates of same-sex sexuality differ based on the aspect of orientation being studied (Priebe and Svedin 2013). There are individuals across large portions of the sexual orientation spectrum that have some measure of same-sex sexuality (Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin 1948); indeed, emerging literature indicates that about 3.6-4.1% of men are “mostly straight,” in that they fall between bisexuals and heterosexuals on many

measures of sexual orientation (Savin-Williams and Vrangalova 2013). The complexity of sexual orientation indicates that sexual identities (gay, bisexual, straight) are not comprehensive enough to account for sexual diversity, explaining in part why some men with a degree of same-sex sexuality identify as straight.

Another explanation suggests that internalized homophobia and concerns about masculinity explain why some men don't openly identify as gay or bi. Speaking about black men who secretly have sex with other men, Hill-Collins (2004:207) argues that "[f]or men on the DL, masculinity that is so intertwined with hyper-heterosexuality renders an openly gay identity impossible." Empirical data support the assertion that homophobia, concerns about masculinity, and expectations of heterosexuality help explain why some men who secretly have sex with other men do not openly identify as gay or bi (Miller, Serner, and Wagner 2005; Wolitski et al. 2006).

These explanations help demonstrate that adopting a straight identity is not as simple as mainstream discourse suggests, but they do not explore the ways that straight-identified men who have sex with men (MSM) themselves understand their sexual identity and sexual behavior, which run contrary to mainstream understandings of straight. The purpose of this paper is to explore why straight-identified MSM identify as such and how they perceive their sexual behavior, filling a gap in the literature, and to demonstrate how heterosexuality is performed. I study straight-identified rural white men because this population has been largely overlooked in sexuality research and because their experiences highlight the performative aspect of heterosexuality.

After providing a review of research about sexual identity, which provides a theoretical framework for my study, I present three main themes: changes to sexual

attractions, reasons for identifying as straight, and the meanings attached to sexual behavior with other men. Half of the participants reported experiencing major changes to their sexual attractions, challenging the assumption that male sexuality is static. There are six main reasons the participants described for identifying as straight: (1) rejection of a gay “lifestyle;” (2) participation in other-sex marriage and family formation; (3) internalization of heteronormative messages during childhood; (4) religious struggles; (5) attraction to women; and (6) infrequency of male sexual contact. Social stigma is the reason many participants described projecting a straight identity to others. The participants explained that they experience sex with men in a variety of ways: (1) an uncontrollable “urge”; (2) heterosexual bonding; (3) a way to satisfy a particular craving for men; (4) a means to act on sexual attractions to men; and/or (5) a way to satisfy needs or desires for sex, regardless of the gender of the partner. In the conclusion I discuss how heterosexuality is a performance, rather than a natural expression of sexuality, and that interpretations—not just attractions and behavior—are central to being straight.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUAL IDENTITY

Scholarship about sexual identity helps put into context behaviors that do not “match” conventional sexual identity labels. Mainstream discourse posits that the gender(s) of individuals’ sexual partners reflects their “true” sexual orientation, and that sexual identity should account for this. Early research about gay sexual identity development reinforces this belief (Cass 1979; Coleman 1981; Minton and McDonald 1984).

Many scholars disagree, however, positing that the gender(s) to which individuals are attracted are only one feature of their sexuality, and that the current system of sexual classification that privileges this preference over all others is arbitrary (Sedgwick 1990). There are no natural labels that describe human sexuality; sexual identities are socially constructed (Katz 1995; Sedgwick 1990; Seidman 2010), and they differ across cultures and time periods. Even conventional understandings of heterosexuality are socially constructed; although other-sex arrangements have existed all throughout history, it is only recently that sexuality has been organized on a hetero/homo binary that emphasizes attractions and the gender(s) of sexual partners (Katz 1995).

Current ways of defining individuals based on their sexual partners or attractions have their roots in mid- to late-19th century medical discourse (Foucault 1978) and new ways of defining appropriate gender roles in response to shifting gender dynamics in education and the workplace (Chauncey 1994; Seidman 2010). Sexuality was not always defined on the basis of sexual partners; for example, Chauncey (1994) demonstrates that among some populations of American men in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, sexual

identity was determined more by masculinity and sex role than sexual partners. Before the identity labels gay, bisexual, and straight were in widespread use, many considered masculine men who topped during anal sex “normal” (Chauncey 1994). In modern times, sexual acts that have gendered connotations may influence sexual identity; for example, among certain populations of MSM in Mexico, men who top during anal sex are considered straight, while those who bottom are considered gay (Cantú Jr. 2009). As many historians and sociologists argue, understandings of sexuality are influenced by culture and time period, and they do not reflect individuals’ “inner essences.”

Even within cultures there are various understandings of sexual identity. As Rust (1992) found, perceptions of the relative importance of attractions and current sexual behavior may influence sexual identity. In her study, lesbians reported that they could have attractions to both men and women and still be lesbian as long as they didn’t act on attractions to men, whereas bisexual women felt that they needed to have attractions to both sexes, but didn’t necessarily have to act on them. Even opinions and information about sexual identity labels may influence which one individuals choose, as Kitzinger & Wilkinson (1995) found in their research about lesbian women. Indeed, many of the women in their sample did not initially identify as lesbian because they held stereotypical views of lesbians and did not think the label applied to them. As Ward (2004, 2008) demonstrates too, a feeling of belonging with heterosexual culture and disidentification with gay culture may influence how men interpret their sexual behavior and their choice of sexual identity labels. There are many factors that influence perceptions of sexual identity—including the weight given to attractions and sexual behaviors, information and views about sexual identity labels, and cultural preferences—and individuals evaluate the

importance of each differently.

Perceptions of sexual identity may also change over the life course. Although early research about gay identities suggested that sexual identity development results in a single “correct” outcome, that is, a gay identity (Cass 1979; Coleman 1981; Minton and McDonald 1984), recent scholarship examining non-heterosexual women indicates that individuals may change sexual identities as their personal interpretations and social context change (Diamond 2003; Diamond 2005; Diamond 2009; Rust 1996). Even in the absence of sexual orientation change, individuals may change sexual identities. Diamond (2003:361), for example, notes that for the women in her sample “identity relinquishment does not represent a fundamental change in sexual orientation itself, but rather a change in how women interpret and act on their sexual orientation.” Indeed, some men who identify as straight may have sex with men because they are currently acting on their sexual orientation in new ways.

As individuals experience changes to their social context throughout their lives, which may in turn influence how they perceive themselves, their understanding of their sexual identity has the potential to change as well (Gordon & Silva 2015; Horowitz & Newcomb 2001; Rust 1996). Thus, straight-identified MSM, like others, may at some point reinterpret the “accuracy” of their sexual identity and adopt a new one. Some may continue to identify as straight, while others may adopt different identity labels. When behavior doesn’t seem to “match” a sexual identity label, as with straight-identified MSM, it may be because those individuals perceive and label their sexuality differently than others might.

When it comes to straight-identified MSM, then, it is important to differentiate

between two populations: (1) those who identify as gay or bi but tell other people that they are straight, and who are thus closeted in the general usage of the term (individuals who “pass” as straight), and (2) those who identify as straight and perceive their sexual identity in ways that run counter to the dominant system of sexual classification.

Individuals in the latter population complicate the relationship between sexual attraction, behavior, and identity by using unconventional interpretations as the basis for their straight identity, rather than exclusively using attractions and sexual behavior, as mainstream discourse dictates. To explore alternative understandings of sexual identity and behavior, I used the following question to guide my research: How do straight-identified rural MSM understand their sexual identity and behavior?

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

After gaining approval from my institution's human subjects committee, I began recruiting participants. In total I interviewed ten men. Although I advertised my study on Craigslist for approximately seven months, I was unable to secure additional participants. Many men likely did not respond to the ad because they perceived participation as a risk. Indeed, all of the participants explained the monumental effort they put forth into keeping their same-sex sexual activity a secret, and many said I, the interviewer, am the only person other than their sexual partners to know about these sexual activities. This helps explain why I received emails from several men who expressed interest in the project, but ultimately decided to not participate. Because I was unable to recruit a larger sample, this study should be viewed as exploratory.

I recruited all ten participants through an advertisement I placed in the men-for-men casual encounters section of Craigslist. Although there are numerous websites that facilitate casual sex arrangements among MSM, I chose Craigslist because many consider it a "go-to" site for casual sex. Craigslist is organized regionally, so I placed ads in several surrounding areas of my graduate institution. My intent in advertising close to my location was twofold: (1) I wanted to have the option of interviewing the men in person, and (2) I assumed my university would be familiar to potential participants and may make them more comfortable with the study. Although I asked each participant to tell his male sexual partners about the project, hoping to snowball sample, only one participant noted that he heard about the study from a friend/sexual partner who participated.

I interviewed only one participant in-person; the other nine I completed over the phone. Most lived more than 45 minutes away from my institution, so a phone interview was more practical for them than an in-person interview. The one in-person interview took place in a private location at the university library. No potential participants dropped out of the study because of the phone interview element.

The interviews lasted approximately one to two hours. I audio-recorded and later transcribed each session. The interviews were semi-structured; I used an interview guide for each interview, but changed the ordering and phrasing of the questions to make the interviews more conversational. This added flexibility allowed me to follow up on information I considered important. I asked questions exploring the participants' sexual identity, sexual attractions, sexual history, ways of meeting sexual partners, descriptions of sexual partners, secrecy surrounding sexual encounters, and the participants' sense of their masculinity. At the end of nine of the ten interviews¹ I gave the participants a brief questionnaire with a few multiple-choice and short answer questions, which gathered demographic information and sexual health data.

Of the ten participants, all identify as white and currently live in Missouri or Illinois. That the sample is exclusively white is not surprising given the high proportion of whites in most of Illinois and Missouri: Excluding all cities over 200,000, Illinois and Missouri are 72.2% and 85.7% white, non-Hispanic, respectively (US Census Bureau 2010). One participant was in his 20s, one in his 30s, one in his 40s, three in their 50s, three in their 60s, and one in his 70s. Nine of the participants currently live in a rural part of Illinois or Missouri, and nine lived in rural areas as a child.

¹ I attempted to send one participant the questionnaire via email after the interview, but after repeated reminders he never completed it.

To define rural, I borrow the US Census classification of an “urban area,” which is a city or town with 50,000 or more people (US Census Bureau 2011). For my project, I consider “rural” to be a non-urban area. All the participants either live in or grew up in an area with fewer than 20,000 residents that is not a suburb or exurb of a large city. Eight told me their exact location and how populated they think it is, and I double-checked these numbers using the US Census. Of the other two, one said he lived on a farm in the countryside and made it clear he did not live in a town, and another simply said he lived in a rural area. Seven participants disclosed the location(s) in which they lived as a child, and I again double-checked the US Census. Of the other three, two said they lived in a rural area near a small town as a child, and the other simply said he lived in a rural area as a child. The one participant that does not currently live in a rural area lives in a suburb of a large Midwestern city but was raised in a small town with fewer than 10,000 residents, and the one participant that did not live in a rural area as a child frequently relocated to cities of varying size because of his father’s occupation.

After transcribing the interviews, I uploaded them to the qualitative data analysis software package NVivo. I spent several hours per transcript coding for recurring themes, and created new codes as I identified emerging themes. After creating new codes I recoded earlier transcripts. I created most of the codes as I read transcripts, rather than at the beginning of the study. It was during open coding that the themes of the current study emerged; indeed, many of the findings were unexpected. Although I created dozens of codes, in this paper I focus only on those related to changes to sexual attractions, sexual identification, and interpretations of sex with men. To ensure confidentiality, I assigned each participant a pseudonym, with the exception of Cain, who chose his own.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Here I present the following themes: changes to sexual attractions, reasons for identifying as straight, and the meaning attached to sexual behaviors. In a separate paper I will examine how the participants construct their heterosexual identity through masculine gender expression, emotional boundaries around same-sex sex, and their choice of sexual partners (including the sexual identity, race, and masculinity of sexual partners).

Pseudonym	Age	Private Sexual Identity	Sexual Identity Told to Others	Reported Sexual Attractions	Relationship Status
Mike	50	Straight	Straight	Exclusively to men	Married to a woman
Brad	48	Gay	Straight, except to select LGB contacts	Exclusively to men	Single, divorced from a woman
Cain	50	Straight, but is considering a bi label	Straight	Almost equally to men/women	Married to a woman
Will	52	Straight-leaning bisexual	Straight, except to select LGB contacts and a few other close friends	Almost equally to men/women, but leaning toward men	Single, divorced from a woman
Marcus	38	Straight	Straight	Exclusively to women	Married to a woman
Pat	69	Straight	Straight	Exclusively to women	Married to a woman
Richard	75	Straight	Straight	Exclusively to women	Single, divorced from a woman
Reuben	28	Bisexual	Straight	Almost equally to men/women	Single, never married
Kevin	69	Straight/mostly straight, with a bit of bi, but is considering a	Straight	About 3/4 to women, 1/4 to men	Married to a woman

		bi label			
Ryan	60	Straight/mostly straight	Straight	About 3/4 to men, 1/4 to women	Married to a woman

To better contextualize the findings, I have included a table that provides more information about each participant. All ten tell other people that they identify as straight. Only Brad and Reuben are closeted in the general sense of the term, as they tell other people they identify as straight when they do not. The other eight participants identify as some variation of straight, suggesting that each has modified and adapted the meaning of straight for their own identification, rather than simply accepting the definition of straight offered by mainstream discourse.

The range of attractions indicates that the mainstream explanation of straight-identified MSM—that they are “really” gay or bi (or mostly straight)—ignores the sexual diversity of the men in this population. Based on attractions alone, one participant could be classified as mostly straight, one as mostly gay, three as bisexual, three as heterosexual, and two as gay. While internalized bi/homophobia play a role in their identification, we cannot simply dismiss these men as victims of internalized oppression. Instead, many of the men identify as straight because of unique interpretations they make about heterosexuality.

Changes to Sexual Attractions

Several scholars have theorized that sexual attractions can shift over the life course due to either sexual orientation change (D’Augelli 1994; Gordon and Silva 2015) or sexual fluidity (Diamond 2009). Gordon and Silva suggest that individuals may reinterpret their sexual orientation after experiencing changes to their personal context, and that the

possibility for sexual orientation change is always present for all individuals. Based on her sample of approximately 100 women, Diamond (2009) takes a different approach to explain female sexuality, arguing that women have a stable sexual *orientation*, a pattern of attractions and desires, but also experience sexual *fluidity*, depending on a complex interplay of biological and social factors. Sexual fluidity is “situation-dependent flexibility in women’s sexual responsiveness,” which “makes it possible for some women to experience desires for either men or women under certain circumstances, regardless of their overall sexual orientation” (Diamond 2009:6).

Empirical data indicate that sexual attractions can change for some individuals. As Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin (1948) found, the sexual behavior and/or attractions of many men may change throughout their lives. Studies indicate that both men and women can experience changes to their attractions (Blumstein and Schwartz 1977; Weinberg, Williams, and Pryor 1994), though much research focuses exclusively on how women’s sexual attractions may change (Baumeister 2000; Diamond 2009; Golden 1997; Schuster 1987). Relatedly, there is a widespread assumption that because of biological and/or cultural factors the sexuality of most men is fixed, whereas women’s is more fluid.

To add to the literature about changes to male sexuality, and to explore how this may complicate sexual identity construction among straight MSM, I asked all the participants if and how their attractions had changed over time. Five of the ten experienced profound changes to their sexual attractions. Whether because of sexual orientation change or sexual fluidity, the length of time these shifts have lasted suggests a fundamental change to their sexuality. Of these five, two said they remembered a particular moment when

their attractions changed, and three described the changes to their attractions as a process. All of these changes were unintentional and unanticipated.

Two participants said they remember a specific instance when their sexual attractions began changing. For Brad, this was when he received a blowjob from another man. While drunk he had walked into an establishment that sold sex toys, and which also had “glory holes” set up in the back. Brad walked to the back to masturbate and saw a tongue being flicked through a glory hole. He said he felt like he should just “give it a try” and that the experience “just sorta happened,” since he hadn’t walked in looking for sex. He did receive a blowjob, though, and this experience affected him greatly:

I: This is sort of a long shot, but can you remember the first moment that you realized that you were aroused by other guys?

B: It was down in [a Southern state], and I had been drinking, and wound up in an arcade, and I got some of the best head I ever had from another, [a] good lookin’ guy. And [that] pretty much sealed it right there for me.

Notably, Brad said he never before experienced sexual attractions to men. It was only after he received a blowjob from another man that his attractions shifted exclusively to men. He said he had been sexually attracted to women but that these attractions completely disappeared:

I: Have your physical or sexual attractions changed over time?

B: They changed from women to men here in the last, oh, ten years.

I: Can you go into that, can you describe that change?

B: Sex with women, it's just, it don't do anything for me. Some of the best sex I've ever had [has been] between me and another guy.

I: Now had you in the past been physically attracted to women?

B: In the past. Yeah.

I: It doesn't sound like you feel that anymore?

B: No.

Kevin also remembers when his attractions to men shifted. Although he recognized attractions to males in high school, his attractions to men grew much more pronounced

later in life. They began changing after his first sexual experience with another man, in his mid-30s:

I: Can you explain how your attractions maybe changed after that point, if they did, or became more pronounced, or//

K: Well, they did some after that. After that, I was attracted more, I wouldn't say more to men than women, but my attraction, my thoughts about men shall we say escalated and I [pause]... But yeah, it did change, it changed a lot. And, I seen it was an option, and it was good...

I: It sounds like after that point then, the attractions you had to men became much more pronounced.

K: Right, and I could, I learned that it was an option. Before, even if I had the thoughts, I didn't imagine I could ever, ever do anything... [I] never had the opportunity. But uh, once I had the opportunity, it's like anything else, when it was more available, there was more opportunity.

I: OK, so then, just to make sure I'm understanding you correctly, then, so after the, after this incident, it became, you realized it was an option//

K: Right.

I: And started meeting up with guys, it also sounds like your attractions became more pronounced as well. Is that//

K: Yes they did, yes they did.

I: And then, did your attractions to women change during that time?

K: Uh, no, no, I don't think so, if they did it was so, such a small change I don't remember it at all. I was attracted to women and stuff and still had sex with both. I mean, no, it didn't change.

After Kevin's first male sexual experience, he realized that sexual activity with men was an option for him and experienced his sexual attractions to men increase.

Three other participants, Mike, Will, and Cain, also explained that their sexual attractions had changed over time, but for them change occurred as a process. Indeed,

Mike noted that his attractions to men shifted slowly:

M: The other stuff [interest in men] was just curiosity, I would think. Until that, well, even when that guy did what he did [give me a blowjob]. A lot of it was curiosity. But as it progressed, it got to the point where I'm [thinking] 'oh, I like doin' this.'

Eventually, sexual attractions for men completely replaced those for women:

I: So it almost sounds like when you were younger, you were attracted to women, but you weren't as attracted to guys, but then that switched//

M: Yes. Well, I think it's something on the inside that's finally matured to the outside. You know what I'm saying? I was sexually attracted to girls, I had sex with 'em and things like that, and there was nothing wrong with that, but I was dealin' with what was on the inside too. And I probably could have went either way. But, because of society and the way I was raised and things like that, I couldn't show the other part. I could only show the heterosexual part. And so that's what I stayed with.

Although Mike's interest in men was at first "curiosity," it later turned into full sexual attraction. By saying this was something that "finally matured to the outside," he indicated that his current attractions to men developed over time. As a result, as he later described, "I'm not attracted to any other women. At all."

Will also experienced changes to sexual attractions as a process. Although he used to be attracted primarily to women, with some minor attractions to men, over the past decade his attractions have shifted such that he is almost equally attracted to men and women, but with attractions to men slightly greater than those to women:

I: And then too, have your sexual attractions changed over time at all?

W: Yes.

I: Can you explain that?

W: I would say it has, gone more toward guys. Um, I, yeah, I would positively say it has changed to uh... I probably check out more guys than I do females.

I: Can you remember when that first started changing?

W: Not really, I mean it would have been within the last ten years, but. I mean specifically, no.

I: What kind of sexual attractions did you have before that point?

W: Oh, it would have been female, and then an occasional checkin' out a dude, you know, he looks good, he's fit, he's clean. You know, just wondering because it wasn't 'til about 10 or 11 years ago that I ever did anything. Other, other than with a female.

Will also experienced his sexual attractions to men increase gradually over many years, and his sexual behavior with men increased along with his attractions.

Although Cain was initially unsure if his attractions had changed, in a follow-up interview he explained that his attractions had, indeed, shifted:

I: Your proportion of attractions when you got married, what would you say was toward men and women, if you're able to remember that?

C: It was probably 80-20, women-men. Because I had very little [sexual] experience, so I had a little bit of curiosity, I had a couple of experiences, but I really, I didn't know what a glory hole even was until I went to grad school, until I was married. So, it was one of those things that I certainly didn't explore [until later]. I would probably say it's 50-50 now.

In addition to his sexual attractions for women and men shifting from 80-20 to 50-50, Cain also indicated that his sexual desires to men increased after marriage, which he thinks may be because sex with his wife created broader questions about his sexual preferences. Cain said clearly that the desire to have sex with men did not exist prior to marriage; he noted “it was after that I got married that I found myself being drawn in and attracted more so to maybe, guys helpin’ each other out.”

Combined, these results indicate that men, as well as women, can experience changes to their sexual attractions. Although sexual fluidity may be responsible, similar to what Diamond (2009) explains for women, the lengths of time these attractions have lasted suggest the participants’ sexual orientation has changed, supporting Gordon and Silva’s (2015) theory of sexual orientation. That said, these men did not “turn” gay because of sex with other men. We can understand their experiences using the framework of Gordon and Silva (2015): they likely interpreted same-sex sex or their feelings from it as relevant to their sexuality, which contributed to their attractions shifting. Other men may interpret similar sexual experiences as irrelevant to their sexuality, thus not causing long-term changes; the *interpretation* of feelings and events are as important as the *actual* feelings or events. Indeed, as I explore later, there are several participants who have sex with men, but who are exclusively attracted to women; clearly, one cannot turn gay because of sexual experiences.

Although there are many reasons the participants identify as straight, there are additional reasons related to their changed attractions to consider. First, Kevin, Mike, Will, and Cain have retained an attachment to their straight sexual identity, despite changes to their attractions and sexual behavior, perhaps because they perceive changes to their identity as threatening (Gordon & Silva 2015; Horowitz & Newcomb 2001). Second, they may be in a transition period between sexual identities, such that in the future they may reinterpret and change their straight sexual identity to reflect dominant constructions of sexual classification; only future interviews will determine if this is the case. This is likely what has already happened to Brad, who identifies as gay but is not open about it because of social stigma.

Reasons for Identifying as Straight

Although there has been extensive research about identity development in gay men (Cass 1979; Coleman 1981; Minton and McDonald 1984; Troiden 1989), until recently few studies have investigated this process in heterosexuals. This is a gap in the literature, given that heterosexuality is socially constructed and is guided by social scripts rather than biological instincts (Ingraham 1994; Katz 1995; Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1994). Researchers are, however, increasingly investigating heterosexual identity development (Boratav 2006; Eliason 1995; Morgan and Thompson 2011; Striepe and Tolman 2003; Worthington et al. 2002). Morgan (2012) and Morgan, Steiner, and Thompson (2010), for example, demonstrate that while many straight-identified men passively adopt their heterosexual identity and question it little, some instead actively question, explore, construct, and maintain theirs. This is the case even as broader processes of questioning and exploration characterize women's straight identities more than men's (Morgan 2012).

Relatedly, new historical trends highlight what used to be taken-for-granted heterosexual identities: Dean (2014) argues that as LGBTQ visibility has increased in American society, heterosexual men and women are perceiving and performing their identity in new ways, often using gender expression as a way to distinguish themselves from sexual minorities. Heterosexuality is still an important identity for most individuals, but the ways in which straights negotiate and perceive their own has changed with historical conditions.

With this in mind, it is fruitful to explore why straight-identified MSM identify they way they do. Because these men are aware that their sexual identity contrasts with mainstream understandings of heterosexuality, they have all considered why they identify as straight. The participants described six main reasons why they identify as straight: (1) unwillingness to live a gay “lifestyle;” (2) participation in other-sex marriage and family formation; (3) internalization of messages during childhood; (4) religious beliefs; (5) attractions to women; and/or (6) the relative infrequency of male sexual encounters. Several participants noted more than one reason for identifying as straight. Further, six identified social stigma as a reason for projecting a straight identity to others.

Three participants noted that their unwillingness to identify with a gay “lifestyle” is a major factor for them identifying as straight², suggesting that internalized homophobia influenced their straight identity. They perceived a gay “lifestyle” as incompatible; they explained that this would necessitate openly living their lives as non-heterosexual and, for Cain and Ryan, divorcing their wives. For the other participants that identify as straight (or some variation thereof), the rejection of a gay identity and “lifestyle” was

² Although most of the participants discussed gay, bisexual, and straight identities, they only acknowledged two “lifestyles”: gay and straight, but not bisexual.

more implicit. Indeed, the eight participants that identify as straight said several times that they see themselves as straight more than anything else, despite their sexual behavior. Mike explained this sentiment clearly: “An alcoholic drinks, but everyone that drinks is not an alcoholic. So my philosophy is, every gay person does this, but not everybody that does this is gay.” Expressing similar sentiments, Cain said “I never have really identified with that gay lifestyle; I just really didn't want to go that route.” Ryan was also adamant about not wanting to identify as gay. He described a period of his life in which he began considering suicide rather than come out as gay, as his therapist suggested he do:

R: The doctor said 'if you're gonna survive this, you're gonna have to come out as gay.' And I couldn't do it. In fact I was planning my suicide because I couldn't do it, so there's gotta be a straight side of me that wants that [to be straight]. OK? Um, and that's been my struggle over the years. So I don't know that I, I can tell you right now that I couldn't come out and start living a gay lifestyle [even though] I have those attractions.

Similarly, Will did not desire to participate in any gay community: “I’m not waving a rainbow colored flag around anywhere, I can tell you that much.” In this way, Will rejected the necessity to be homonormative and participate in a community simply because of his attractions.

Five participants explained that their participation in conventional other-sex marriage and family formation—rather than their sexual behavior—is an additional reason they identify as straight. Of these five, four are currently married and one used to be married but is now divorced.³ All five have children, and the four currently married men said they are happy with their marriage and have no intention of leaving their wives. As Kevin shared, he is happy with his married life and intends to maintain it:

³ Will said he was only divorced because his wife initiated the separation, and that he was very happy during the marriage.

K: Well, I'm a husband and a father, and a grandfather, and I consider that a part of a man's life as bein' straight. I enjoy my kids, I enjoy my wife, and enjoy my life, and I certainly wouldn't want to change it. I have no intention of leaving the wife for a guy or anything like that, it's just, the guy part is just somethin' I do. Kinda like some guys drink too much. It's hard to explain.

For Kevin, sex with men is simply a pleasurable activity he does from time to time; to construct his straight identity, he gives primacy to his involvement in his other-sex marriage. Ryan also values marriage and childrearing: "I desired having a wife and a family and I sought that lifestyle." He elaborated, saying "I would think that I'm most comfortable as straight or I probably would have changed to a gay lifestyle several years ago. So to me a straight lifestyle is being a family man and acting that way." An additional four men have children and are currently or were previously married, suggesting that family formation was or is tightly connected to heterosexuality for nine out of the ten participants.

A third and similar reason seven participants identify as straight is their upbringing, which resulted in the internalization of heteronormative messages (especially those regarding family formation). There is considerable overlap between this and the last reason, which is to be expected given the emphasis many families place on marriage and reproduction. Will explained that he identifies as a straight-leaning bisexual because he was raised to value marriage and childrearing, which he did until his wife divorced him:

W: Well I was married. I do have children. I'm not married anymore. [Straight is] the life your parents had. Uh, [pause], the straight life is according to everything you learned when you [were] growing up. Man and a woman, gets married has children, you have a house, and, it doesn't always work out that way, but that for me is what a straight life [is].

Similarly, Mike identifies as straight in part because he was taught that is how men should live:

M: Well, the straight home that I was raised in, we were taught that no matter what, that you're a straight male, and you're supposed to get married, you're supposed to do all these things, so I've always identified with that because that's how I was raised. I wasn't raised to do any of the other things.

On a related note, Kevin said “I grew up in a religious household in a rural area, [and I] still live in a rural area. And uh, bein’ gay or bein’ bi when I was young, was not an option. Not an option the way it is today.” Both Kevin and Mike said that although they are happy with their lives, they’re not sure if they would have been different had they grown up today, suggesting they may have not chosen to get married if their social context had been more accepting of same-sex sexuality. Their statements indicate that their conservative, rural childhood socialized them with conservative, heteronormative messages, which play a role in their identification as straight.

A fourth reason participants identify as straight involves religious influences. Two described their religious beliefs as an ongoing struggle, while two others said religion influenced them as children but did not describe current religious struggles. Cain went into the most detail describing his struggles with religion. He said he currently has “deep religious convictions” and believes that his “religious belief system does not view this behavior, these acts, as something a Christian should do.” As a result, he feels “disappointment” at his behavior and constantly seeks to suppress it. Will also described the effects of his religious upbringing:

W: You try not to act on them [attractions to men]. I mean, the way you were raised. Of course, I was raised in a Baptist home, and, I think that had a lot to do with it, and what you're taught is, you grow up, you marry, you have children, that's the life you live, there's no relations with a male...”

Kevin, like Will, also noted the influences his religious upbringing had on his identity, but said he is not currently religious.

Another reason four participants identify as straight is because they are sexually attracted to women and not emotionally attracted to men. Indeed, Marcus, Pat, and Richard are exclusively sexually attracted to women, while Kevin's sexual attractions are about $\frac{3}{4}$ for women and $\frac{1}{4}$ for men. For these four, their attractions are what influence their sexual identity, not their sexual behavior. As Richard shared, he "feel[s] no love whatsoever for another man," and said "I will not and have not ever kissed a man. That is repugnant to me." He explained further:

R: The actual sex act itself is the only thing I'm interested in with a man, whereas with a woman a sex act is important, but also the huggin' and the kissin' and the cuddlin' and all that sort of stuff that goes with it. A man and woman make out. I don't make out with a man. That's, I guess that's a big difference right there, I never make out with a man.

Kevin mentioned a similar feeling, saying "I've been with guys only for sex, not because there was any love or feelings involved." For these men, major distinguishing factors between sex with women and sex with men are the emotional feelings and non-sexual physical intimacy (e.g. kissing, cuddling) that happen with women but not men. In the next section I will explore more fully why the three men who are exclusively attracted to women have sex with other men.

The sixth and last reason for identifying as straight—infrequency of sexual activity with other men—was described by two participants: Will and Kevin. Both said they don't have sex with men very often, suggesting that their sexual activity doesn't hold great importance for their lives or sexual identity. When I asked Will to describe his sexual identity, he initially said "If someone's honest about it, I guess you would have to say

[I'm] bisexual, but I don't really live that life.” He elaborated, saying “it’s just not very often” that he meets up with other guys for sex. Kevin described similar thoughts when explaining why he identifies as straight:

K: I have been attracted to guys, so, I can't be 100% straight, but I am pretty close, I think. I've never done a lot of heavy stuff with guys, I don't meet guys every few days or anything like that, uh, but every 6 weeks or so I do, on average, sometimes it's longer, and sometimes it's sooner, but uh, I just consider myself straight, and that's all I can say, I guess.

For these two, the frequency of their male sexual encounters did not hold great meaning for their lives or sexual identity. Instead, other aspects of their life—such as their involvement in other-sex marriage and childrearing—held primacy for their sexual identity.

Until now I have presented data about why the participants identify as straight, and now I detail why they project a straight identity to others. Six mentioned that an unwillingness to experience stigma influenced the identity they tell others, though the fact that all are secretive about their same-sex sexual behavior indicates that this fear is either explicit or implicit for all ten. This finding is consistent with mainstream understandings of the closet: Some individuals attracted to the same sex attempt to “pass” as straight to avoid prejudice. As Will stated, “I think living a straight life is a much easier one than it would be to live a gay life. Maybe that's part of the reason I am who I am.” Mike also stated that he identified as “normal” to avoid stigma: “You had to identify with normal, so to speak, and straight to avoid any kind of backlash, persecution, whatever you want to call it, for being something different than that.”

Internalized bi/homophobia has certainly influenced how the participants perceive and project their sexual identity. Many of the reasons they gave for identifying as straight

reflect their heteronormative social context as both children and adults, the messages of which they internalized. In this way, even “authentic” desires to identify as straight and live a straight “lifestyle” stem from systemic heterosexism (Seidman 2002). Additionally, the motivation for all ten to remain secretive about their sexual behavior with other men reinforces the power that the “closet” still holds for the lives of many individuals who are attracted to and/or engage in sexual activity with the same sex. Thus, although the symbolic closet is changing and weakening in many contexts (Dean 2014; Seidman 2002), it is still very powerful for some individuals.

While it is necessary to understand the role of internalized bi/homophobia, it is not appropriate to make judgments about the “correct” sexual identity of these men. Individuals perceive and interpret sexual identity labels differently (Gordon and Silva 2015, Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1995, Rust 1992). Consider the numerous criteria individuals use to choose a sexual identity: sexual attractions, emotional attractions, sexual behavior, desires, fantasies, participation in conventional marriage and childrearing, and gender expression, among others. Individuals perceive the importance of each differently, influencing their identity. Some see conventional other-sex family formation as meaningful to their sexual identity, but not their attractions, desires, or sexual behavior. Several of the participants are exclusively or predominately sexually attracted to women and have no emotional attractions to men; for them, identifying as straight demonstrates that they do not view sexual behavior as relevant to their identity, but it does not necessarily reflect internalized bi/homophobia.

The Meaning Attached to Sexual Behavior

Little research has explored the meaning of sexual activity for straight-identified MSM. While Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin's (1948) study of male sexuality indicated that same-sex sexuality was far more prevalent than previously believed, they did not explore the meaning of this for their participants. Humphreys' (1970) study of anonymous sex in public restrooms, on the other hand, showed that many men—before the acceptability of same-sex sexuality increased, and before the Internet facilitated casual sexual encounters—engaged in anonymous male-male sex to satisfy sexual desires while still maintaining their public identity as heterosexual, family-oriented men. Anything with greater involvement may have threatened their ability to maintain their public identity and current family life.

Jumping forward into the age of the Internet, Ward's (2008) content analysis of personal ads in the casual encounters section of Craigslist-LA by men who identify as str8 provides cultural insight into this population. Ward (2008) argues that central to the identities of many straight-identified white MSM (str8 men) are their participation in normative heterosexual culture and the ways in which they interpret and bound their sexual behavior. Her data show that many str8 men have a distinct masculine, white, heterosexual identity, and use homophobia—including the rejection of gay culture—as a strategy to express it. Ward's later research (forthcoming; see also Ward 2015) also reveals that sexual behavior between straight white men is common, but that it is not labeled or interpreted as sexual by these men; certain sexual behaviors are perceived as bonding experiences, initiation rites, or humiliation rituals meant to express power over others, rather than sex or intimacy. For many straight white men, perceptions of the “sexual” activity they perform are influenced by broader constructs of the heterosexual

masculinity they embody.

To investigate the meanings straight MSM place on their sexual behavior with other men, I asked the participants several questions about why they meet up with other men. They frame their drive to have sex with men in the following ways: (1) urges that need to be resolved; (2) male bonding that “helps” them and others get off; (3) a specific craving for men; (4) attractions/desires for men; and (5) needs/desires for sex, regardless of the gender of the partner. Several of the framings overlap for many of the participants.

Both Cain and Ryan explained their sexual behavior with other men as a way to release urges. Although both are sexually attracted to other men, they frame their desires to have sex with other men not simply as a way to act on attractions, but as a way to resolve uncontrollable, unwanted feelings. Cain explained his urge as “an impulse that I have, and that I try to keep it in check.” Cain further described acting on his urges as “almost like a chore,” and said when he does act on them it is “more, just satisfying needs, it’s almost like even if I jerk off just watching porn, or get off with someone, it’s like now this is out of the way, now I can get my work done.” Ryan reiterated Cain’s sentiments, saying “once in a while it [the urge] builds up in me,” and that “if I go out and cruise at noontime and find somebody that I can have a quick encounter with, that’s just, me getting my urge taken care of.” Ryan also distanced himself from his urges, saying “I definitely am compartmentalized, and that part of me that acts out on those urges is different than the other part of me... we’re two different people.” Interpreting same-sex sexual behavior as a way to release urges indicates that both have rejected the possibility that they are gay or bi; they are acting on urges only to relieve them so they can continue to live their straight lives otherwise uninterrupted.

Mike and Cain described a second framing of same-sex sexual behavior: “helping a buddy out.” This emphasis on helping other guys suggests that both perceive sex with men to constitute a form of heterosexual, emotions-free bonding. The majority of both men’s sexual partners are men in relationships with women, suggesting that sex between two guys in relationships with women—two “buds”—is a way for each to help the other satisfy sexual desires in a way that doesn’t harm either one’s other-sex relationship. Because both perceive their other-sex marriages as central to their straight identity, interpreting and acting on sex in this way allows them to experience pleasure without threatening their other-sex marriage—and by extension, their straight identity. As Mike said, “It’s just helpin’ a buddy out.” He further explained the “help” he gave his friends and the emotionally bounded sexual activity that occurred:

M: In your mind you’re thinking you’re not gay, you’re just helping somebody out. This poor guy, he’s married, his wife won’t do it [give him a blowjob]... But basically it was, if your wife won’t do it, come, I’ll do it, or my wife won’t do it, then we’ll get together and just do it together. And so, I guess in my mind, I wasn’t thinking this is a gay thing, this is just, I’m just helping my friend out. He just needs some helpin’, he’s helpin’ me out, and once it’s over with it wasn’t like call the next day, ‘oh, how are you,’ no, this stuff, it was over. Til the next time. It was over, there was no... they call it NSA now, no strings attached, yeah, so it was a no strings attached thing.

For Mike, sex with men is purely physical, without any emotional attachment, and it is done in the context of “helping friends.” Cain perceives sexual behavior with other men similarly, also saying he views it as “guys helpin’ each other out.”

Cain expanded on this point, saying he sees sex with men as a way to keep his desires for other men in check and, in so doing, maintain his marriage:

C: So, I kinda look at it in my own mind as, I realize that this is an impulse that I have, and that I try to keep it in check, and I’m thinking an occasional bud or whatever to help me out is what I need. And so, it’s kind of the way I look at it. [Pause] I would never cheat on my wife with

another woman. That it's like, being, with a guy every so often, helps me kinda maintain, in fact sometimes it even seems like it helps me become a better lover to her, but, that's, maybe part of my rationalization, I don't know.

For Cain and Mike, sex with men is not just a way to experience sexual pleasure; it is also a way to maintain their marriages by serving as an outlet for desires that cannot be satisfied in any other way. The participants' sexual encounters actually *strengthen* their heterosexual identity, as they are able to secretly satisfy desires in a way that ensures they can maintain their married, heterosexual life that is central to their straight identity. Both men made it clear that they will never leave their wives, indicating that their married life and heterosexual identity is of utmost importance to them.

Just one participant, Marcus, explained a third framing for sex with men: a way to satisfy a particular craving for men. Marcus was clear that he is *not* sexually attracted to men. Additionally, he explained that he has a satisfactory amount of sex with women (other than his wife), and that he does not meet up with guys because he cannot have sex with women. Instead, he does so because "it just seems like, um, once in a while I'll just kind of get a craving, so to speak. It's like, hmm, I haven't done that in a long time, maybe I'll see if I can't do that." He elaborated further: "I think it's just more, um, somethin' kinky, somethin' taboo, somethin' just a little bit different from the norm." For Marcus, giving and receiving oral sex with men is a way to satisfy cravings that are arousing because he perceives male-male sex as "taboo" and "kinky," even in the absence of attractions. Because he is exclusively attracted to women, he does not perceive his same-sex sexual behavior as meaningful to his straight identity.

Seven participants explained a fourth framing for sex with men, which is a way to act on sexual attractions to men. I spend little attention on this theme because it is consistent

with mainstream understandings of sexual behavior. Of these seven, Mike, Cain, and Ryan also frame sex with men in other ways—in particular, ways that reinforce their straight identity. Of the other four, who frame sex with men exclusively as a way to act on attractions to men, Brad identifies as gay and Reuben as bi; their interpretations of their sexual behavior reinforce their identities. The other two, Kevin and Will, did not use alternative interpretations of their sexual behavior to bolster their straight identity, instead relying on other interpretations. Kevin explained that he identifies as straight because he is mostly attracted to women, infrequently has sex with men, and is married to a woman—so for him, framing sex with men as a way to act on attractions is not threatening to his straight identity. Similarly, Will explained that he identifies as straight because of heteronormative messages and religious influences as a child, disidentification with gay culture, infrequency of sexual activity with men, and interpretations of the importance of other-sex marriage and childrearing to a straight identity—indicating he, too, does not find framing sex with men as a way to act on attractions as threatening to his identity.

Five participants frame sex with men as a way to relieve “needs” or desires to achieve sexual release, regardless of the gender of the partner. Mike, Cain, and Ryan are all sexually attracted to men, but each said they meet up with guys at least sometimes, in part, because they want or need to get off. Pat and Richard, who are exclusively attracted to women, began having sex with men to fulfill general sexual desires. Years after Pat’s wife stopped having sex with him, which he said was a result of chemotherapy after cancer, he explained “I finally decided well, I can’t live this way anymore, I’ve got to have some blowjobs. Or the little woman has to start spreadin’ her legs.” He elaborated:

P: I decided, well, I'm not livin' this way. So uh, that's when I started lookin' for guys that wanted to give blowjobs. Now your next question is why didn't I choose women. I could have, and would have, but, you've got to think the whole thing through. You've got to be logical. Were I to have an affair with a woman on the side, women are gonna talk. They're emotional. They're gonna talk. They're gonna let the secret out. As opposed to meeting up with a straight man, they're not gonna talk. They're not gonna let the secret out. So I guess that's when I decided.

Pat has sex outside of his marriage because his wife is no longer interested in sex, and he has sex with men, specifically, because he thinks they are unlikely to tell others. As Pat explained, he is straight because he is attracted to women; he has sex with men only because he needs to get off. Interpreting sex with men as an option of last resort, to fulfill a need, reinforces Pat's straight identity.

Richard's framing for sex with men also concerns relieving general sexual desires, but is more complicated; it involves frustrations with women, health concerns, and his prior job. Like Pat, he has sex with men in part because he believes women only want to be taken care of, and do not desire sex. Further, years prior to the interview he had an accident, which makes it very difficult to maintain an erection. He gives blowjobs to men because he does get "some emotional release out of the deal," which he described as different and lesser than sexual satisfaction, but better than nothing. Richard was clear that he is only interested in sex: "the only thing I'm interested in is a hard dick and the only thing then is I want to make it cum and then I'm through with it, I don't want nothin' else to do with it. That's why I consider myself to be more straight than gay, I guess." Interestingly, even decades prior to the accident Richard had oral sex with men. As a trucker, he would be away from his then-wife for large stretches of time, and eventually began receiving oral sex from men on the road to release sexual desires. He only started giving oral sex because his sexual performance was impaired by his accident. Richard too

interprets sex with men as a way to satisfy a need, and as an option of last resort; consequently, he too uses interpretations of sex to reinforce his heterosexuality.

These data demonstrate the complex and multifaceted meanings of male-male sexual activity for straight-identified MSM. Some men described several framings for their sexual behavior with other men, while others offered only one. Rather than being just a way to act on attractions, sex for straight-identified MSM is imbued with various meanings. These results reinforce the findings of Humphreys (1970) and Ward (2004, 2008); several participants frame sex with men as a way to achieve sexual release without endangering their family life, and their identification with heterosexual masculinity—and disidentification with gay culture—influences their interpretation of their sexual behavior. The numerous framings of male-male sex demonstrate that it is not just sexual behavior that is meaningful to a straight identity, but the interpretation of it. Many of the participants' interpretations of same-sex sexual activity actually reinforce their straight identity. Thus, there are both queer and straight ways of having same-sex sex: the same act can be interpreted in many ways, and can be used to reinforce both straight and non-straight identities.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The results from this study indicate that although attractions are not controllable and cannot be intentionally changed, heterosexuality as an identity—like gender (Butler 1990; West and Zimmerman 1987)—is performed, rather than naturally enacted, in the context of particular institutional and social arrangements. Straight-identified MSM provide an ideal way to examine this performance, as many are hyperaware of their own. Although eight of the ten men identify as some variation of straight and feel as though what they are doing is compatible with their understanding of heterosexuality, the fact that all are secretive about their sexual behavior indicates that they understand the need to perform a conventional “show” of heterosexuality.

The men described various ways of “being” straight, including participating in conventional other-sex marriage and family formation, keeping their same-sex sexual activity a secret, and acting “normal” or “masculine” (which I explore in a separate paper). Many participants’ interpretations of their sexual behavior reinforce their straight identity as well. Their narratives shed light on the process by which *all* heterosexuals, even those exclusively attracted to the other sex, perform their sexual identity.

Heterosexuality is not simply a matrix of attractions and/or sexual behaviors; it is also a set of interpretations and ways of participating in conventional institutions, such as other-sex marriage and family formation. Being heterosexual also involves passing as heterosexual, which these men did by keeping their same-sex sexual activity a secret, maintaining the appearance of a straight “lifestyle” in the eyes of family and friends, and

maintaining gender normativity (for an exploration of the centrality of gender to contemporary heterosexuality, see also Dean 2014).

Straight-identified MSM experience multiple intersecting forces of sexual stratification, including that related to heterosexism, expectations that personal sexual identities must “match” mainstream understandings of sexual identity labels, and assumptions of monogamy. Indeed, the cultural emphasis on monogamy legitimates love and sexual intimacy between two individuals in a relationship while devaluing all other forms of emotional and sexual intimacy (Hidalgo, Barber, and Hunter 2008). This influenced many of the men in the sample to hide their sexual behavior with others, restricting their sexual expression and further marginalizing them.

Future researchers should seek to broaden the scope of the current study. Straight-identified MSM are highly secretive and, thus, extremely difficult to access for research, so other studies should extend the time period of data collection to recruit as many participants as possible. In addition, future studies should seek to interview straight-identified MSM not only in other rural locales, but also in suburban and urban locations. It would also be beneficial for researchers to examine the intersections of race, class, masculinity, and location to the sexual identities and lives of this population.

This research raises a broader question about non-normative sexualities: Is behavior a hallmark of queerness, or are particular cultural frames? In line with Ward (2004), I do not believe straight-identified MSM are queer. Data from this study indicate that it is interpretative frames, rather than behavior, that distinguishes queers from non-queers. Although the participants’ sex lives are unconventional, they seek to keep them secret while identifying as straight (for eight of them) and maintaining a public heterosexual

performance. Most of them hold a heterosexual cultural frame and share little in common with queer people.

At the same time, the existence of straight-identified MSMs *is* potentially queer. These men's narratives, as a whole, indicate that sexuality is fluid for some individuals; heterosexuality is performed, rather than naturally enacted; and heterosexuality is a matrix of not just attractions and behaviors, but also of interpretations. Normality can be challenged not just from the fringes of sexuality and gender (e.g., LGBTQ+ individuals), but also unintentionally *from within* the institution of heterosexuality itself. These men's narratives reveal that heterosexuals are not sexually homogenous, but rather heterogeneous. They also show that heterosexuality is a verb, not a noun.

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