

“I provide the pleasure, I control it”: sexual pleasure and “bottom” identity constructs amongst gay youth in a Stepping Stones workshop

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Abstract: *This paper explores the meanings attached to gay sexuality through the self-labelling practices of a group of young gay-identified students in focus group and individual interviews in Johannesburg, South Africa. These meanings include constructs of the dynamics surrounding safe sex negotiation and risk related to “top-bottom” subject positioning as well as the erotics of power and desire that are imbued in these practices and positioning. Using performativity theory as a theoretical tool of analysis, I argue that constructs of “top-bottom” subjectivities can be seen to meet certain erotic needs for LGBTI youth, including reasons related to physical safety for LGBTI people living in dangerous spaces. The performance of “bottom” identities in sexual intimacy and behaviour is further deployed in the expression and performance of power that the participants construct as erotic. The implications for sexual health intervention include understanding the gendered performance influences of sexual behaviour including safe sex, exploring creative ways that practices of sexual health can be engaged with this population group in a way that accommodates the erotic pleasure interfaced with sexual identity identifications and performances of “bottom” identities. © 2015 Reproductive Health Matters. Published by Elsevier BV. All rights reserved.*

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Reading sexual scripts: invoking heteronormative gendered norms

Top/Bottom identities are usually attached to sexual practices amongst gay men (although not restricted to gay men only) that describe active roles such as an insertive sexual position during anal and/or oral intercourse (top) as well as so-called passive receptive roles (bottom identity). These labelling practices are not only restricted to sexual intercourse but may extend to other facets of subjectivity, behaviour, lifestyle and other interactions and performances.^{1,2} Also important to note is that both these labels connote a labelling practice that may not resemble the way many gay men experience pleasure, practice sexual health and even identify. Researchers³ have noted that many gay-identifying men not only do not identify with these labels but also may simultaneously perform these identities in different moments and contexts. In other words, the top/bottom distinction is not always as rigid in practice but may be characterized by different contexts of being or performing “top” or “bottom”. Furthermore, these identity distinctions do not stereotypically characterize many gay relationships and interactions but should in fact be seen as a

social construct. Some researchers have further argued that both top and bottom identities are constitutive of multiple aspects of sexual position, behaviour, identity and other developmental influences.³ Such fluidity in identification and performance demonstrates the importance of challenging binary (re)productions of gendered and sexual subjectivities more generally.

In exploring constructs of top/bottom identities amongst gay men, researchers have highlighted the role of heteronormative sexual scripts in structuring how gay men’s identification and sexual practices are “read”.³ Seidman appropriately talks about this as the “sex/gender/sexuality system”.⁴ These heteronormative scripts have been argued to be reading non-heterosexual practices and subjectivities through the a heteronormative lens, which is not ideal in its reiteration of the very hegemonic norm that it seeks to destabilize. Still yet, other researchers⁵ argue for a more nuanced approach that both engages the moments of reproduction and reiteration of the hegemonic norm and yet also acknowledges the sites for re-imaginings and resistances. Early research⁶ discusses sexual scripts as embodiments of social

and not biological processes. In other words, sexual scripts are tied to the sexual codes of behaviour and identification that individuals in a society may learn and internalize as natural and specific to particular genders.⁷ It is thus not surprising that these sexual codes of behaviour are replicated in how intimate and sexual practices are “read” amongst non-heterosexual couples. More recently the role of gendered stereotypes of masculinity and femininity in how gay men both negotiate and label potential partners as “top” or “bottom” has been explored.^{8,9} Sexual scripts may operate on three different levels: intrapsychic (within the individual); interpersonal (between two people) and cultural (as a cultural and social construct).¹⁰ The value of understanding and analysing the sexual scripts that are reproduced in speech is that we are able to get a clearer sense of both the individual engagement and internalization of broader discourse as well as the significance of the latter on individual psyche.¹¹

In further elucidating the conundrums of sexual scripting, researchers have drawn distinctions between heteronormativity and homonormativity as hegemonic practices that inform how gay male intimate and sexual practices are read. *Heteronormativity* refers to those sexualities that broader society deems both natural and acceptable and which therefore occupy a naturalized hierarchical position in sexualities.¹² This naturalized hierarchy includes those practices of sexuality that are heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative and so on.¹³ Such performances of sexuality that have been deemed acceptable by society in turn come to function in hegemonic ways that dictate how other sexualities may be read and performed.¹ More often than not, these other performances of sexuality fall short of the ideal and are marginalized accordingly.¹⁴ Ironically, practices of marginalization also exist within many same-sex relationships that sometimes invoke and reproduce heteronormative categories of identification and behaviour, but also at other times, reproduce matrices of intersectionality that are functional in the marginalization of particular groups of LGBTI-identified groups within the community. For example research shows that fear and threat of violence affects black lesbian women more than other LGBTI-identified groups living in South Africa.¹⁵ Enjoyment of rights to sexual and gender expression intersects with other socio-historical and cultural privileges both in terms of access to basic sexual and reproductive resources as well as protection of bodily integrity.

Researchers further note that cultural norms have been influential in the equating of penetration during sex with gendered sex roles. These sex role prescriptions define in rigid ways identifications of masculinity and femininity in men and women as well as amongst gay men. The labels of “top” versus “bottom” come to be associated with particular practices of penetration whereby the penetrating partner is assumed to be the more active, aggressive and therefore “masculine” individual. This is in direct contrast with the partner who is penetrated, constructed as the “feminine” partner – that is, passive and effeminate. These heterosexual gendered norms are not only deployed in “reading” sexual practices of gay men but also function in stigmatizing ways that construct many “bottoms” as lesser than and lacking sexual agency.^{12,16} On the other hand, the intricate ways that these normalizing practices of sexuality come to be invoked and reproduced within same-sex relationships and interactions have been explored.¹⁷ Using the term “homonormativity” some researchers²⁰ describe those practices that actively reproduce the heteronormative ideal in same-sex relationships as embodying same regulatory function. The self-categorization as “top” or “bottom” for example, reproduces particular sexual scripts that reinforce heteronormative notions of masculine vs feminine and gender roles.

In a South African context research has shown that cultural scripts inform how sexuality and sexual behaviours are performed and practiced.¹⁸ This research demonstrates the importance of intervention at the level of cultural sexual scripts that influence how sexualities are expressed and performed. More recently, sexual scripts have been shown to be not only important to understanding of sexuality in South Africa, but also to understanding of how sexual scripts intersect with other social categories of race, gender and class to influence practices of safe and unsafe sex.¹⁹ In other research focused on how black men living in South African townships negotiate practices of anal sex, partner characteristics and interpersonal dynamics were identified as one of the key aspects to ability to negotiate use of lubrication, amongst other practices²⁰. The research further argues for concerted focus on cultural specific interventions that address the importance of cultural sexual scripts in health education. Understanding the different cultural and sexual scripts amongst black men who have sex with men (MSM) in South Africa requires a critical engagement with the narrative scripts informing many discriminatory practices

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