
HETEROSEXUAL MEN & SEXUALITY

Michael Flood

Heterosexual men's sexuality is implicated in a variety of pressing social problems, including the transmission of HIV and STDs, unwanted pregnancy, sexual violence, homophobia and poor relationships. This article offers an outline of the construction of heterosexual men's sexuality, examining such issues as masculinity, identity, intimacy, consent and pleasure. It argues for the positive reconstruction of this sexuality, and offers the HIV and AIDS epidemic as one possible site of such a project.

Men's sexuality has come into the public spotlight in Australia during the last three decades as a result of several important social shifts. The most important is feminism, with its critique of unfair gender relations and of the role of men's sexuality in this. Very briefly, other important shifts include the emergence of gay liberation, the so-called sexual revolution, and the rise of self-help and personal growth movements. Although these developments have had uneven and contradictory consequences, collectively they have meant that men's sexuality is now very much the object of political criticism and social commentary.

Any consideration of men's sexuality must acknowledge its social and political context. There are two deeply interrelated aspects to this: gender relations and sexual relations. Firstly, Australian society is structured in ways that advantage men and disadvantage women, and heterosexual relationships are structured and constrained by broader social relations between and among men and women. To give just one example, women continue to have the overwhelming responsibility for child-care and domestic work, and the paid labour market is still characterised by both horizontal and vertical segmentation by gender. These patterns have a very real material effect on the possibilities for egalitarian relations among heterosexual couples.

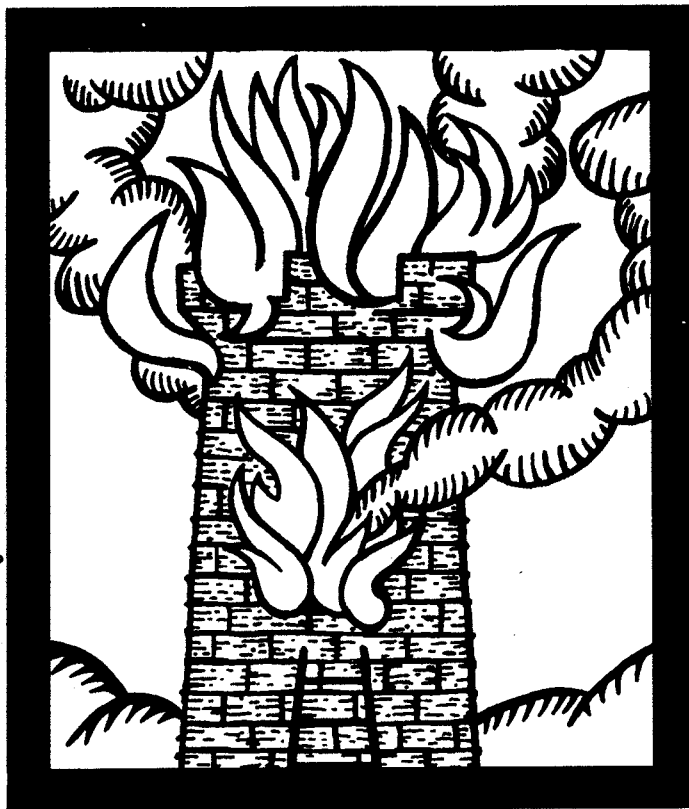
Secondly, sexual relations in Australia are structured by heterosexual dominance. Heterosexuality

is positioned as socially legitimate, 'natural' and 'normal', while other sexualities are policed and constructed as unnatural and perverted.

To understand men's sexuality, we need to understand the construction of masculinity: the social production of what it means to 'be a man'. Australian sociologist Bob Connell argues that in any society there are multiple masculinities and femininities but one version of masculinity is dominant, or 'hegemonic', as the most honoured and influential cultural representation of masculinity. Briefly, the key qualities required to 'be a man' are that men be strong, unemotional, heterosexual, in control and aggressive. Hegemonic masculinity is based on the subordination of women and on hierarchies among men themselves.

Connell points out that the masculinities practiced by the majority of men do not correspond to this ideal, but hegemonic masculinity is supported by large numbers of men. The main reason "*is that most men benefit from the subordination of women, and hegemonic masculinity is the cultural expression of this ascendancy*" (Connell, 1987, p.185).

One of the most important features of contemporary hegemonic masculinity is that it is heterosexual (Connell, 1987, p.186). Homophobia, a fear and hatred of homosexual people and of gay men in particular, is central to the patterning of relations between men (Kinsman). Homophobia



functions as the dragon at the gates of an alternative masculinity; it polices the boundaries of conventional masculinity. Homosexuality is perceived as gender betrayal; while deviation from dominant masculinity is perceived to be homosexual.

The meanings given to masculinity are structured by other social relations of race and ethnicity, class, age and sexuality, so the 'content' of hegemonic masculinity will vary in different social locations and among different groups of women and men. Hegemonic masculinity does not determine totally men's experiences and performances of masculinity. Nevertheless, all men live in its shadow.

Sexuality and identity

Perhaps the most important thing to know about masculine sexuality is that it is intimately linked to male gender identity. The successful physical performance of masculine sexuality is essential to confirm men's masculinity. We can find evidence for this in heterosexual men's accounts of their experience of sex with women, and in the significance for men of failure at appropriate masculine sexual performance. In regard to the former, Hite's (1981) surveys disclose penis-vagina intercourse as verifying male identity. Also failure at masculine

performance (loss of erection or lack of erection in particular) is experienced by men in deeply gendered terms, as threatening the loss of their manhood, and induces humiliation and despair in many men (Tiefer, 1987, p.168).

One of the qualities of the dominant discourse of masculine sexuality is implicit in this account: masculine sexuality is based on performance and potency. Having good 'sexual technique', defined as an abstract set of skills, and being able to give a woman orgasms are the defining features of one's manhood. According to Leonore Tiefer, male sexual performance has as much to do with the confirmation of masculinity and status among men as with pleasure or intimacy (Tiefer, 1987, p. 167).

The sexual myths that are the basis for the dominant model of men's sexuality are efficiently summarised by Fanning and McKay. Men should always want and be ready for sex. A real man never loses his erection. A man's penis should be large. A man should always bring his partner to orgasm (preferably multiple). Sex only involves intercourse followed by orgasm. A man should always know what to do in sex. A man should always be aggressive. All physical contact must lead to sex. Sex has to be natural and spontaneous. I won't comment on each of these and on what men can do to avoid them, as this is done very well by Zilbergeld in *The New Male Sexuality*.

I would now like to explore three themes regarding heterosexual men's sexuality: intimacy; coercion and consent; and negotiation and reconstruction. These patterns represent substantial obstacles to the sexuality and form of relationship that I take as ideal. In this ideal, sexuality is based on consent and respect, and sexual relationships are characterised by equality and mutuality.

Intimacy

There are several common images of heterosexual men's relationship to intimacy and emotions. Men are seen to be 'emotional incompetent' and 'emotional constipated' (Doyle, 1989, p.158). We attempt to have all our emotional needs satisfied by a female partner, without doing the same in return. Thus there's an emotional division of labour, in which the wife or girlfriend provides emotional and sexual servicing. This pattern intersects with men's

common neglect of friendships, which are rarely sources of deep sharing and support (Strikweda and May, 1992).

Many men conflate love and sex; and intimate and loving relations can only be pursued through the medium of sex. For most adult heterosexual men, sexual relationships are the only place where they get held, nurtured, and treated with affection and love (Kaufman, 1993, p.241). Men's intimate relations with both men and women are fundamentally structured by homophobia and misogyny. Masculinity is defined by what it is not: not-feminine, and stereotypically feminine qualities are denigrated. Intimate relations between men are treated with fear and hatred, and closeness is treated with suspicion.

Hite and Colleran (1989, p.30,) describe the unequal emotional contract which is common in heterosexual relationships: a man withholds equal emotional openness from a woman, trivialises her and doesn't listen to her, and *then* turns to her looking for love, affection and understanding. They describe a series of patterns familiar to me: emotional confusion and ambivalence, putting women down, dismissing women's feelings, believing that their view of reality is the correct one and that women's view is crazy, neurotic or merely wrong.

There are a whole series of complicated emotional issues that we wrestle with in relationships. I don't have a great grasp on all these but I do have a clear sense of appropriate ways to behave in a sexual relationship. I try to be honest and act with integrity; to take responsibility for my actions, and for my feelings and reactions; to respect my partner, which includes acknowledging her will, desires and feelings; to assert my own will, desires and feelings; and to build and maintain good friendship networks and communities as sources of support and energy.

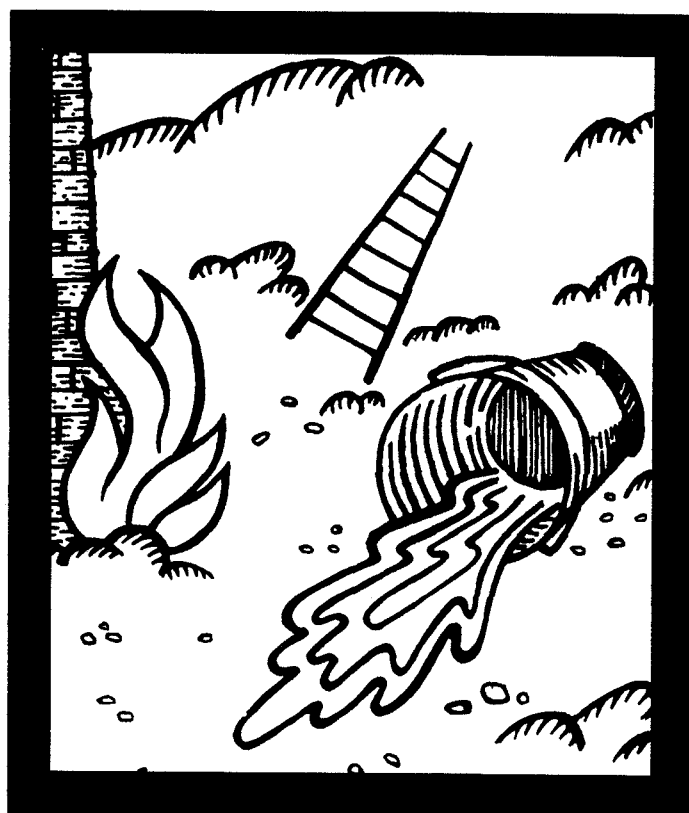
Coercion and consent

When examining heterosexual men's sexuality and the character of men's sexual relationships with women, we have to acknowledge the presence of men's violence towards women. I'll begin by describing feminists' distinctive contribution to our understanding of men's violence.

Firstly, feminists have documented women's experience of a range of violence, including sexual

violence, battering, child abuse and harassment, and women's generalised fear of such violence. Men's violence against women is widespread and socially legitimated. Secondly, feminists have criticised explanations that pathologise and individualise men's violence, arguing instead that violence is the normative expression of an aggressive, coercive and woman-hating masculinity. Thirdly, this critique has problematised a number of distinctions common to discourses about violence: between 'typical' and 'aberrant' men's behaviour; between 'victims' and non-victims; and between 'offenders' and other men. Finally, feminists have contributed the insight that men's violence is an important element in the organisation and maintenance of gender inequality.

In the late 1970s and 1980s there was an important shift: masculine sexuality and heterosexuality were increasingly seen as fundamentally implicated in this violence (Edwards, 1987). Writers such as Adrienne Rich, Kathleen Barry, Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon argue that women's subordination under patriarchy is eroticised and violence is 'made sexy'. For these authors, sexuality is seen as an important, if not central, site of male supremacy and is founded on



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a regime of compulsory heterosexuality. This regime involves the invasion, colonisation and destruction of women's bodies, women's spirits and women themselves. Furthermore, masculine sexuality is fundamentally implicated in men's violence and in the perpetuation of male supremacy. Men's sexuality (both straight and gay) is viewed as predatory, aggressive and founded on the desire to exert power and control over women.

One of the most crucial insights here is that men are taught a rapist sexuality: we are taught to be sexually violent. Men are taught to behave in aggressive and coercive ways, and we're taught to believe that it's okay to do so. 'No' apparently means 'yes', and we can avoid responsibility through claiming an uncontrollable male sex drive. Other things contribute to men's coercive potential in sexual relationships with women. There's our socialised deafness to women. There's our tendency to interpret conversation and touch in more sexual ways than women do. There's often our intense desire for intimacy, which we think can only be realised through sex. And all this is in a culture where there are images eroticising forced sex.

Recognition of these things is vital. At the same time, we have to be careful to avoid three potential problems in these areas:

(1) Let's not view male sexuality and masculinity in essentialist, ahistorical or totalising ways. Neither violence nor masculinity are unitary phenomena. Lynne Segal writes in *Slow Motion: Changing Men, Changing Masculinities* that, "in terms of developing a sexual politics against rape and male violence, it hardly seems helpful to refuse to distinguish between men who rape and men who don't." (Segal, 1990, p.240). Race and class relations structure different forms of masculinity and produce differing likelihoods for violence.

(2) Let's be careful, when describing why men act the way they do, that we don't confuse the *effect* of violence with its *intent* (Liddle, 1989, p.764). Sometimes male agency is portrayed in a one-dimensional and instrumentalist fashion: men are violent or oppressive to serve political interests, and violence is a 'tool' of male control. I certainly agree that men's violence exerts social control over women and perpetuates masculine privilege, but this does not necessarily mean that this is its intent.

(3) This system of oppression, this pattern of men's power is not total, not all-pervasive. Heterosexual sexual relations are certainly not always and ever oppressive. There is room for localised resistance to and negotiation of power relations. And I don't want to define women's agency and women's pleasure in heterosexual sex and heterosocial relations out of existence.

If we look at men's lived experience of sexual practice and sexual relations, we find that it is certainly not reducible to male dominance. Yet there are ways in which the deployment of masculine sexuality gives men power and control over women. On the other hand, as Lynne Segal (1990, p.212) states, "*for many men it is precisely through sex that they experience their greatest uncertainties, dependence and deference in relation to women - in stark contrast, quite often, with their experience of authority and independence in the public world.*"

However, these issues do not take away from the fundamental importance of this critique, and its two crucial insights. These are the fact that violence and other forms of coercion are present in everyday heterosexual relations, and that heterosexuality is not simply a freely chosen relationship between individuals, but embedded in institutionalised power relations.

Men have to look critically at our sexual practice. We have to make consent the absolute bedrock of our sexual practices and relationships. What's more, this requires explicit verbal negotiation. It requires asking: saying "Is this nice?", "How are you going?", "Can I put myself inside you?", "I'd like to do such-and-such, would you like to?" And we have to take no for an answer. I believe that all this makes for better, hotter sex. Talking and sharing builds trust, which builds passion. Feeling safe and in control of our choices can be a real turn-on and builds sexual intimacy and mutuality (Weinberg and Biernbaum, 1992, p.32).

Negotiation and reconstruction

The HIV and AIDS epidemic offers the potential for a radical reconstruction of heterosexual men's sexuality. Before saying how this might occur, I will describe the research which forms the context for this potential reconstruction. There are two

projects of particular interest: the AIDS and Heterosexuality Project at Macquarie University and the Women, Risk and AIDS Project (WRAP) and Men, Risk and AIDS Project (MRAP) in Britain. Both have investigated women's negotiation of heterosexual sex in the context of unequal power relations and problematic discourses of gendered sexuality.

Jane Holland et al show that women's requests for condom use are structured by discourses which position men as knowing sexual actors and privilege masculine sexual experience. Sexual encounters are sites of struggle within these discourses, and represent more direct modes of male power and women's ambivalence and resistance (Holland, et al, 1991). Sue Kippax et al. argue that negotiation is rendered unintelligible in some contemporary discourses of sexuality, such as the 'male sex drive discourse' in which women's sexuality is represented as passive and receptive (Kippax et al, 1990). They argue that negotiation is only made intelligible "*when men and women acknowledge women's sexual desire and women are empowered to give their voice to that desire.*" (p.541)

In both the Australian and British research, more recent work has turned its attention to men's role in sexual negotiation. Waldby, Kippax and Crawford describe men's resistance to a negotiated sexuality: a perception of penis-vagina intercourse as the natural and defining act of sex; unprotected sex as signifying intimacy; a dislike of 'sex talk'; a preference for sexually active and initiatory positions; and a view of themselves as possessors of 'good technique' (Waldby et al, 1993a, p.254-55).

Waldby, Kippax and Crawford have investigated the personal maps of safe and infectious relations in the AIDS discourse of young men (Waldby et al, 1993b). They find that they are based on a 'cordon sanitaire' - a division between 'clean' and 'unclean' women, based in particular on the degree to which these women's bodies have been shared with other men. Women's bodies are seen as conduits for the potentially threatening meeting of male bodies.

As Tamsin Wilton and Peter Aggleton (1991, p.155) state: "*ideologies of heterosexual masculinity represent a powerful counterforce to the promotion of safe sex.... A systematic deconstruction of masculinity is central, not merely tangential, to radical HIV and AIDS discourse.*"

We can also see barriers to the adoption of safe sex in heterosexual culture in general: gendered inequality; the hegemonic status of heterosexuality as natural and normal, with instinctive spontaneity as the central icon of heterosexual desire (Wilton and Aggleton, 1991, p.152-153); the ideological positioning of HIV and AIDS as homosexual; erotophobia (or what Gayle Rubin (1984) calls 'sex-negativity'); a heavily moralistic discourse of sexual practice; the comparative silence of heterosexuality (that is, that there are fewer discursive resources than in lesbian and gay culture with which to mobilise safe sex); and the absence of a heterosexual community.

Much contemporary AIDS education aimed at the general population deflects responsibility for sexual practice away from men and onto women, and takes as given the centrality of penis-vagina intercourse. However, the promotion of 'safe sex' could include de-emphasising intercourse as the key act of sex, and encouraging men to take responsibility for their sexual behaviour. Among organised gay communities, pro-sex approaches have been most successful. These approaches eroticise safe sex and reconstitute the sexual vernaculars



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of gay culture. Such approaches should also be adopted in relation to heterosexual sexual relations, but safe sex education must also challenge those discourses which disempower women and reproduce patriarchal and homophobic power relations.

I hope to be part of a radical reconstruction of masculine heterosexuality, that transforms men's sexual relations with women, and the relations between men and women of different sexual identities and communities. I see this as part of a broader project: the creation of a pluralist and egalitarian sexual and gender culture.

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