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The Other's bedroom: College student conceptions of gay and lesbian sex and pleasurability

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**The Other's bedroom: College student conceptions of gay and lesbian
sex and pleasurability**

by

Janelle M Pham

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

Of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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Thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Sociology.

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ABSTRACT

Studies which have examined heterosexual attitudes toward sexual minorities have often examined the formation of such attitudes on the basis of moral positions and/or perceptions of out-group behavior. However, what role individual conception of the sexual practices of non-heterosexuals has on prejudice or discrimination against sexual minorities has yet to be addressed. This study conducted in-depth interviews with a small sample (n=14) of college undergraduates at a mid-sized private university as an initial examination into individual conceptions of gay and lesbian sexual behavior and sexual pleasure. Results found that gender, and its conflation with physiology, is highly influential to the formation of sexual schemas. More specifically, the presence or absence of the penis, and its identification with the male body, situated participant conceptions of gay and lesbian sex and influenced perceptions of the potential for gay or lesbian sexual acts to be pleasurable. Such findings highlight the impact of cultural messages to informing sexual understanding in a patriarchal society.

INTRODUCTION

On December 22, 2010, President Barack Obama signed a bill to repeal “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” This was an historic occasion which set into motion the process of ending the seventeen-year-old law which has called for the discharge of openly gay, lesbian and bisexual servicemen and women.¹ However, not all servicemembers are in agreement with these changes. In February of 2010, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates announced the formation of a Comprehensive Review Working Group which would examine the issues associated with a possible repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” Among the Working Group’s charges was the dissemination of a random survey to military members and their spouses, in which individuals would be able to provide their thoughts on repealing the law. The survey was supplemented by focus groups and interactive online and confidential communications. In the published report of their findings, the Department of Defense included comments provided by servicemen and women which represented overarching themes present in reactions to the possibility of serving with openly gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals. “I think homosexual sex leads to diseases,” read one comment in the report. “There’s always a chance to getting what someone has” (U.S. Department of Defense, 54). “Tell him if he hits on me I will kick his - - -!,” read another (51). Under the report’s theme “creation of a new protected class,” one servicemember remarked,

How will it fair for me to potentially decline social events with my gay boss or subordinates because of my religious beliefs? How do I host events without [Equal Opportunity/Inspector General] complaints because I would not invite gay couples? My moral values cannot be compromised to support what I consider immoral behavior (55).

¹ Barack Obama’s signing of the bill on December 22nd did not result in an end to Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. Rather, certification of the bill by the President, the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is needed. Sixty days after certification, Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell will officially be repealed.

While these remarks should not be taken to be representative of all servicemen and women, they are nevertheless telling. The association of homosexuality with transmission of disease, overzealousness in sexual advances, and immoral behavior is certainly not limited to the military institution. However, the reaction of servicemembers to the possibility of a repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell serves as an example how non-heterosexual men and women are perceived as dangerous and unwanted by virtue of the sexual relationships in which they engage (or don't engage).

The rights and privileges of gay and lesbian men and women continue to be a hot-button issue in the United States. In a culture in which heterosexuality is the norm, the homosexual Other is a strange, immoral and controversial character. The condemnation of homosexuality on moral grounds, religious or otherwise, is often used to explain hostile attitudes or behaviors towards homosexuals. However, perceptions of the actual sexual behaviors of gays and lesbians, and how this contributes to negative attitudes, have not been examined. In "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," Gayle Rubin confronts the politicization of sexual behavior, such that "erotic non-conformity" becomes subject to intense public regulation:

Sexual activities often function as signifiers for personal and social apprehensions to which they have no intrinsic connection. During a moral panic, such fears attach to some unfortunate sexual activity or population. The media become ablaze with indignation, the public behaves like a rabid mob, the police are activated, and the state enacts new laws and regulations. When the furor has passed, some innocent erotic group has been decimated, and the state has extended its power into new areas of erotic behavior (297).

Sexual politics contain, constrain and limit the power, influence and visibility of societal outgroups. This includes homosexual men and women.

Through the construction of a societal discourse in which attraction to the opposite sex is assumed and monogamous heterosexual sex is promulgated as the standard for sexual relationships (what Adrienne Rich referred to as compulsory heterosexuality), the visibility and legitimacy of homosexual sexual relationships becomes compromised. Cultural messages about what sex is, how it should be performed, and who should be engaging in it are driven by this understanding of heterosexuality as *the* legitimate sexual identity. What implications does the obscuring of homosexual relationships have for dominant understandings of what homosexual sex is? Examining conceptualization of homosexual sexual behavior is important for understanding what role such conceptualizations play in attitudes toward and treatment of gay and lesbian individuals. Additionally, understanding common conceptualizations of homosexual sexual activity moves beyond reactions to such relationships on the basis of morality alone. Certainly this can make for an important and positive intervention in the continued struggle for gay and lesbian equality in America.

To this end, this research serves as an initial inquiry into individual conceptualization of gay and lesbian sexual behavior. Additionally, perceptions of the potential for gay and lesbian sexual relationships to be as pleasurable as those of heterosexual sexual relationships are important to more comprehensively understanding how gay and lesbian sexual relationships are regarded and how they fit into cultural and individual sexual schemas. In particular, this research will examine what a sample of heterosexual, bisexual and non-identified college undergraduates were taught about sex, how these individuals conceive of the sexual practices of gays and lesbians, and how they view the potential for pleasurability of gay and lesbian sexual activity. The value of this

study lies in its approach to understanding how gays and lesbians are viewed in the dominant culture by asking individuals how they conceptualize same-sex sexual behavior and understand it in relation to cultural constructions of heterosexuality as the norm.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sigmund Freud is perhaps the most widely recognized figure among proponents of a drive theory of human sexuality. Freud's postulate that human beings possess a sexual drive enabled him to interpret certain behaviors as sexual in nature. This was most notable in his application of a sexual motive to the actions of children, such as nursing from the mother or touching one's genitals (Freud, 1962, pp. 48, 54). At the heart of the drive theory of human sexuality was the idea that the urge to procreate is innate, present at birth, and wholly natural.

While the drive theory is still accepted as explanatory of human sexual behavior, alternative theories exist which call into question the presence of a "natural" sexual state. An interactionist approach to understanding human sexual behavior replaces the notion of a sexual drive with one of social construction.² Although the biological processes associated with sexual behavior are rather fixed, interactionists assert that sexual behavior is context-dependent, as seen in differing sexual practices (and beliefs and attitudes about these practices) cross-culturally and throughout history. Symbolic interactionists further argue that what a culture understands of human sexuality and related sexual behavior is dependent on the meaning given to certain behaviors and actions. In effect, nothing about what we do sexually is natural, but rather can be reduced to societal constructions. This

² Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick and David Halperin are among the scholars who have championed an interactionist approach to understanding sexuality.

includes determining what is considered sexual and giving meaning to those behaviors which are classified as such.

With this understanding, sexual behavior becomes, all at once, both public and private, socially constructed yet still subject to individual interpretation and derivative action. Applied to the current research question, it may be argued that how individual participants conceive of the sexual practices of others will depend upon societal constructions of sexual behavior, as well as individual interpretation and experience. In this way, both macro- and micro-level forces are at play in the development of individual schemas about sexual behavior. Studies which have examined sexuality from a social constructionist framework will be discussed in the following sections. In addition, how this study will both respond to and fill in the gaps in the literature will be considered.

Teaching Sex and Gender: Sexual Scripts and Cultural Institutions

Socialization to sex and sexual messages can be found throughout social institutions. However, parents, family members and educators are often thought of as the first “official” sources of sexual information. Therefore, family and schools are understood as important institutions for teaching and communicating dominant cultural messages about sex to young adults. In an era of increasing technology, the role of media in the transmission of sexual messages must also be considered as a major source of information. Finally, peer interactions are important to both learning about and validating feelings and experiences with sex and sexual relationships.

Simon and Gagnon have used their theory of sexual scripts to convey the process of transmitting cultural messages about sex on an institutional level, and its resultant impact on individual experiences, desires and fantasies. The sexual scripting model

effectively illustrates both the macro- and micro-level forces which inform individuals' sexual lives, and considers the process by which individuals come to learn what sex is and how it is (or should be) performed. In this way, dominant social groups "write" the script with respect to what is considered acceptable and unacceptable sexual behavior (Simon and Gagnon, 1999). More specifically, Simon and Gagnon identified three interrelated levels of scripting: the cultural, the interpersonal and the intrapsychic. Cultural scenarios exist at an institutional level, providing broadly defined instructional guides for behavior, while the interpersonal is the individual's interpretation, modification and application of these cultural scenarios to their own lives. The intrapsychic is an individual's construction of their own desires and fantasies as they are informed by the cultural and the interpersonal. In this way, individual agency in the formation of sexual scripts is not lost; however, the influential role of the cultural script in these formations is also addressed. Indeed, Simon and Gagnon have noted that to assume that cultural scripts translate neatly into interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts "is to treat the conduct of individuals as if it were immediately responsive and reflective of the social order" (1987, pp. 5).

Studies of the messages that major cultural institutions communicate with respect to sex reveal that parents and educators emphasize a message which stands in stark contrast to those found in media. In their survey of secondary school teachers who taught sex education, Darroch, Landry and Singh found that over a ten-year period ranging from 1988-1999, sex education curriculum in schools had increasingly focused on abstinence-based messages about sex, while information on topics such as birth control or other contraceptive use steeply declined (2000). Additionally, the percentage of surveyed

educators who taught about sexual orientation declined over the ten-year period, from 68.5% to 51.3% (pp. 207). Other studies which have addressed the heteronormative bent of school-based sex education programs have found that less than half of a sample of educators responsible for teaching the curriculum addressed homosexuality, and that even those who did typically spent less than one class on such subject matter (Telljohann, Price, Poureslami, Easton, 1995), while Garcia's interviews with Latina youth have demonstrated how school sex education curriculum is not only heterosexist, but gendered and racialized (2009). A content analysis of contemporary sex education films by Hartley and Drew also considered how sexual and gendered messages are intertwined. The data from their study revealed that the majority (89%) of the films surveyed contained gender-differentiated scripts, which communicated distinct messages about what constitutes male and female sexuality (Hartley and Drew, 2001). Additionally, CJ Pascoe's ethnographic study of an American high school has illustrated the ways in which sexuality is constructed through "disciplinary practices, student-teacher relationships, and school events," both inside and outside of the sex education classroom, and how these constructions communicate heterosexuality as the norm and inform male student conceptions of masculinity (2007, pp. 27). In a country with compulsory education, the privileging of heterosexuality and its implications for the silencing of sexual minorities and queer subject matter disturbingly suggests the educational system as a major contributor to the reproduction of a heteronormative social structure.

Additionally, the relatively sheltered approach of schools to addressing the topic of sex has had implications for where young adults seek out information which has not been covered by parents or in schools. One study found that a sample of college

undergraduates categorized school sex education as focused on anatomy and physiology, to include sexually transmitted diseases, and that peers and individual reading were considered to be the most fruitful sources of information regarding sex that was not biologically-based (Andre, Dietsch and Cheng, 1991). Young adult preference for peers with regards to topics related to sex has been demonstrated elsewhere. Two studies which have examined where undergraduates had learned about sex found that males reported learning the most about sex from peers and media (Epstein and Ward, 2008), while another sample of both undergraduate men and women found that peers were ranked as the primary source of information regarding sex (Trostle, 2003). In terms of content, the males in Epstein and Ward's study reported receiving abstinent or safe-sex based messages from parents, while media and peers espoused "discourses that make sex look fun, casual, powerful, and positive" (pp. 123). With such divergent areas of focus when it comes to educating young men and women about sex, the preference for media and peers over more sanitized messages conveyed by parents and schools is not surprising.

Carpenter's content analysis of female teen magazines over a twenty year period provides a female-directed examination of sex-based messages. Between 1974 and 1994, the magazine *Seventeen* expanded its messages regarding female sexuality, to include the discussion of homosexual topics and sexual activity in ways which Carpenter states may empower women (1998). However, it was also found that the construction of sexual messages by *Seventeen*'s editors helped to affirm dominant cultural scripts with respect to overlooking or presenting alternative scripts in a negative light, with the possible consequence of reproducing gendered and sexual hierarchies.

The internalization of these messages about sexuality and gender have implications for adult heterosexual sexual behavior, as indicated by a study of the similarities and disparities between individual idealized and actual scripts for sexual behavior and related perceptions of the idealized scripts of one's sexual partner. Miller and Byers found that stereotypes related to male and female sexual scripts play an important role in the perception of a sexual partner's idealized scripts (Miller and Byers, 2004). That heterosexual conceptualizations of a sexual partner's desires are informed by stereotype suggests that gendered expectations for sexual behavior are embedded in cultural messages about sexuality. Indeed, studies of general dating behavior in collegiate students have revealed that traditional scripts exist with respect to the initiation of sexual activity, with males more frequently initiating sexual activity than women (O'Sullivan and Byers, 1992), while women are more invested in partner engagement and emotional intimacy than men (Frey and Hojjat, 1998). While these studies may present a more or less structured set of male and female roles in sexual relationships, interviews of heterosexual men and women in large American cities has revealed that non-traditional gender scripts were more often associated with long-term relationships, whereas courtship rituals in newly initiated relationships adhered to more traditional gender roles (Seal and Ehrhardt, 2003; Seal, Smith, Coley, Perry and Gamez, 2008). These findings may point to the early internalization of distinct gender roles which are used to initially guide sexual relationships and partner interaction, with a less stringent adherence to such roles as the relationship matures.

Given cultural emphasis on distinct gender roles and its relation to Rich's notion of a compulsory heterosexuality, in which the power of heterosexuality is made evident

by assumptions that one is straight until proven otherwise, depictions of and messages about gays and lesbians through major social institutions such as the media must be taken into account (Rich, 1980). In a study of undergraduates which examined which sources discussed homosexual subject matter, Calzo and Ward found that the topic of homosexuality was addressed more often by peers and media than by parents or schools (2009). Additionally, media were more likely to convey homosexuality as an issue of orientation rather than morality. The frequency with which the media may address the topic, however, should not be confused with societal acceptance or accurate portrayals. While the number of gay, lesbian and bisexual television characters has grown over the past several decades, such characters are typically limited to supporting roles, and homosexual subject matter is almost always relegated to primetime television (Battles and Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Dow, 2001). Content analyses of primetime television shows have revealed that gay characters are portrayed in sexual situations more often than heterosexual characters (Netzley, 2010), that character portrayals continue to adhere to such stereotypes as the body-conscious gay man who cruises dance clubs for other men (Manuel, 2009), and that homosexual couples on television are often ascribed heterosexually-based male-female/dominant-submissive roles (Ivory, Gibson and Ivory, 2009). Netzley concludes that a growing portrayal of gay characters in sexual relationships suggests a positive development relative to their overtly negative portrayal in previous decades. However, portraying non-heterosexual characters in primarily sex-charged situations both plays on and contributes to such cultural stereotypes as the hypersexual gay male and only serves to further complicate the path to more accurate representations of the gay and lesbian population. Manuel's consideration of the popular

gay-themed television show *Queer As Folk* imparts a similar conclusion, namely that character portrayals still conform to homosexual stereotypes, and that this means more than just having entertainment value. Additionally, Manuel cautions against confusing increased homosexual representation on television with increased acceptance. To the contrary, “homovoyeurism” enables heterosexual viewers to engage with the show’s characters in the privacy of their homes without the possible discomfort of addressing their thoughts or opinions in social situations (pp. 281).

Media depictions of gay and lesbian individuals have both positive and negative implications for societal perception and consequent treatment of these groups. While television enables a safe space for heterosexual individuals to confront their ideas about homosexuality and homosexual sexual relationships, such spaces skew representation with plays on stereotype and unusual plot lines which may be understood as “the norm” for such minority groups. For example, while the HIV-positive characters in *Queer as Folk* may make for a positive intervention by way of addressing such issues, they also confirm the stereotype of HIV as a gay disease. For a medium which seeks to entertain, television creates such portrayals without consideration for how viewers might interpret these depictions as either typical or atypical, and what such understandings may mean for individual treatment or prejudice against sexual minorities.

In examining heterosexual conceptualization of homosexual sexual activity, the role of cultural messages concerning sex, how they are produced, who controls them and how this informs individual ideas, attitudes and conceptions about sex is paramount. In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault sought to dispel the notion that power, and the creation of social hierarchies, is concentrated within the state (1988). Rather, he argued that the

tools used to create social hierarchies are embedded in our knowledge and our ideas about truth, which are interspersed throughout the state and other social institutions. More specifically, Foucault described the formation of discourses of sexuality which were legitimated by the emergence of such powerful institutions as science and medicine. Additionally, in his concept of bio-power, Foucault sought to address the ways in which these institutions effectively incite its citizens to participate in the control of bodies, to include the regulation of sexuality by way of legitimating heterosexuality (pp. 143-144). Heavily influenced by Foucault, the emergence of queer theory in the early 1990s also addressed the social construction of sexuality and the formation of a discourse which depicted heterosexuality as natural and all other sexual identities and orientations as unnatural. Feminist theorists such as Gayle Rubin have also considered the power of politics and the law in constructing sexuality, and how sex law in particular has tremendous influence on how we experience the sexual act. In her essay “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” Rubin describes how the construction of a sexual hierarchy that is politically and morally legitimated has resultant consequences for those who do not conform to the standards of what is “good” (read, moral) sex: “One of the most tenacious ideas about sex is that there is one best way to do it, and that everyone should do it that way” (pp. 283). As a result, individuals of sexual minority status living in a heteronormative society become marginalized, their sexual behaviors regarded as deviant in contrast to the heterosexual concept of sex as penile-vaginal penetration between a man and a woman, preferably for the purpose of reproduction.

Both queer and feminist theory serve to explain the origins and continued existence of prejudice against sexual minorities at the macrostructural level. Legitimizing heterosexuality on the grounds of its supposed naturalness has been embedded in social institutions, effectively organizing a sexual hierarchy which affords certain rights and privileges to heterosexual citizens while excluding those whose sexual behaviors do not fit dominant conceptions of how the sexual act should be performed. This discourse, in its representation of the dominant (heterosexual) culture, consequently informs cultural sexual schemas. However, as the next section examines, the construction of interpersonal scripts and ideas about what is legitimate and non-legitimate when it comes to the formation of sexual relationships provides ample evidence that cultural-level messages are not always accepted at face value.

Changing Conceptions of Sex

In his insistence that he “did not have sexual relations with that woman,” President Clinton drew widespread attention to what behaviors constituted sex or a sexual relationship. Perhaps not surprisingly, studies of individual definitions of sex have grown since the mid-1990s as the rest of America pondered what exactly it meant to have sex. While most studies reflect the continued prominence of penile-vaginal penetration as the most common definition of sex, findings also suggest that definitions are becoming more encompassing. In their survey of undergraduates who were asked to respond to whether or not they would have considered their engagement in certain sexual behaviors to count as having had sex, Sanders and Reinisch found that 99.5% of respondents classified penile-vaginal intercourse as sex, while other sexual behaviors did not come close to reaching a level of consensus (1999). A qualitative study of individuals’ virginity-loss

experiences also revealed that penile-vaginal intercourse is still the standard for definitions of virginity loss, but that “the definition is expanding and becoming more flexible, inclusive, and individualized overall” (Carpenter, 2005, pp. 55). Additionally, Carpenter found differences between homosexual and heterosexual individuals. Though gays and lesbians often described oral and anal sex as indicative of virginity loss, most heterosexually-identified participants did not view these acts as indicative of virginity loss. While this particular study was focused specifically on definitions of virginity loss, the findings do point to a varied understanding of what sex consists of.

Other studies examining how sex is defined by individuals highlight the importance of context. This includes whether an individual is defining their own sexual behaviors or the behaviors of someone else (Gute, Eshbaugh and Wiersma, 2008) or what consequences the application of the label of sex to a particular sexual act will be (Peterson and Muehlenhard, 2007). This second point is particularly salient when individuals want to keep their status as a virgin, shed that status, or justify a particular sexual encounter as not indicative of cheating on a spouse or partner. Another study has shown that the gender of the respondent and whether or not an orgasm was present is also influential in defining sex (Bogart, Cecil, Wagstaff, Pinkerton and Abramson, 2000). In their survey of undergraduate students Bogart et. al. found that when individuals classified the sexual actions of a hypothetical couple, the hypothetical female’s definition of sex was broader than that of the hypothetical male. In addition, the likelihood that both characters would classify their experience as sex increased if an orgasm had occurred.

Consideration for the way in which homosexual sex or relationships are understood are largely lacking, and further highlight the prominence of gendered and

sexual messages which are innately heterosexual. The findings described above all serve to suggest that cultural messages combine with individual experience in order to inform definitions about sex. Additionally, findings suggest that definitions of sex are broader than the perceived standard of intercourse, at least among the younger populations sampled. Yet while such studies are valuable in their finding of a more encompassing definition of sex, the operationalization of these definitions is limited and heteronormative. Stated another way, in the use of survey methods to measure participant definitions of sex, respondents are often choosing from a limited number of sexual behaviors and items are often worded to suggest male-female partnerships. In this way, the measurement of heterosexual definitions of sex is more certain; whether or not these definitions are applicable to same-sex partnerships is not. This study will address the gaps in a literature which has been focused on how heterosexual sex and sexual relationships are understood by examining conceptualization of gay and lesbian sexual behavior.

Comparing Heterosexual and Homosexual Sexual Relationships

Despite the debate about the applicability of script theory to non-heterosexual sexual relationships, a subset of studies related to sexual scripting has compared homosexual and heterosexual sexual satisfaction and sexual activity.³ These studies have found both similarities and differences between the two groups. A 1983 study of lesbians and heterosexual women revealed that both groups shared similar rates of sexual satisfaction, though the lesbian sample showed higher rates of self-disclosure, gender

³ More specifically, in Whittier and Melendez's study of the intrapsychic sexual scripting of gay men, the authors challenge the application of script theory given the theory's notion that much of what individuals do sexually is culturally defined. Rather, Whittier and Melendez assert that individual agency is just as, if not more, important in the development of sexual scripts. With this argument, the authors also address sexual scripts as prescribing sexual expectations based on the assumption of a "normal" sexual attraction to individuals of the opposite sex. Therefore, sexual scripts are argued as heteronormative, and thus a limitation to understanding the formation of scripts which challenge cultural scenarios.

empathy and frequency of orgasm (Coleman, Hoon and Hoon). In a related study, it was shown that basic relationship processes function similarly for both lesbians and heterosexual women, with sexual satisfaction proving a strong predictor of relationship well-being and mental health regardless of whether a woman was engaged in a mixed-sex or same-sex relationship (Holmberg, Blair and Phillips, 2010). Similar results were reached in a study examining the relationship between subjective sexual experiences and relationship type (mixed-sex or same-sex, male or female). While it was determined that the four relationship groups showed similar levels of sexual communication and engagement in similar sexual activities (with the exception of anal sex), differences were found with respect to the greater valuing of sensual or erotic aspects of sexuality in same-sex relationships (Holmberg and Blair, 2009). Additionally, same-sex relationships had higher rates of sexual desire in solitary sexual activities than mixed-sex relationships. These findings are significant in that the dominant culture still largely equates sex with penile-vaginal intercourse. Such an equation may have a consequent effect on the value that heterosexual individuals place on more emotionally charged, sensual activities which may not involve penetration. The importance of penetration in heterosexual relationships is also suggested by the higher value attributed to solitary sexual activities among those engaged in same-sex relationships.

These comparisons of heterosexual and gay and lesbian sexual satisfaction are also significant based on the determination of numerous similarities between the groups. Holmberg, Blair and Phillips' finding that sexual satisfaction was shown to be a strong predictor of two dimensions of well-being demonstrates that both lesbian and heterosexual sexual relationships can be satisfying to the individuals involved in them,

though my study will take this a step further in asking heterosexuals to address whether or not they believe this to be so. Additionally, the concept of the orgasm, particularly the male orgasm, has been shown to be important to informing definitions of sex. As such, considering how heterosexual men and women understand the importance of orgasm to the sexual experience may consequently inform how they conceive of same-sex sexual behavior. The identification of both similarities and differences suggests that perhaps heterosexuals will be able to identify with same-sex sexual activity on some levels, but that mode of orgasm and genital differences may play an important role in forming an understanding of same-sex sexual activity and pleasurability.

Attitudes toward Homosexuals

Descriptive and Correlated Patterns

An examination of the empirical studies of heterosexual attitudes toward homosexuality reveals a long list of independent variables that have been tested in order to discern their relationship with and possible affect on the development of attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. Though the populations studied and the measurement of these attitudes is varied, there are nevertheless consistent patterns. More notably, a consistent relationship has been found between negative attitudes toward homosexuals and religiosity, such that those who attend church more frequently and subscribe to more conservative religious doctrine are more likely to express negative attitudes toward homosexuals (Jenkins, Lambert and Baker, 2009; Finlay and Walther, 2003; Schope and Eliason, 2000; Herek and Capitano, 1995; Herek, 1988; Larsen, Cate and Reed, 1983; Larsen, Reed and Hoffman, 1980; Levitt and Klassen, 1974). Relatedly, subscription to traditional gender roles (Schulte, 2002; Whitley, Jr., 2001; Marsiglio, 1993; Herek, 1988; Mosher and

O'Grady, 1979) and conservative sexual values (Schulte, 2002; Louderback and Whitley, 1997; Levitt and Klassen, 1974) were also related to negative attitudes toward homosexuals. These findings related to sex and gender have, on more than one occasion, been accounted for in terms of a generalized gender belief system, such that Western culture defines appropriate behaviors for men and women (Whitley, Jr., 2001; Louderback and Whitley, Jr., 1997). Judith Butler bridges this connection between gender and sexuality in *Gender Trouble*, in which she states that “normative sexuality fortifies normative gender” (1999, pp. xi), such that the policing of gender establishes heteronormativity and, in return, heterosexual normativity informs gender construction. Therefore, the association of homosexuals with possession of cross-gendered traits, sexual roles and physical characteristics, inasmuch as they deviate from the behavioral norms for men and women, leads to the development of negative attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. The greater pressure felt on men to conform to these gender roles may also serve to explain why heterosexual males have been found to harbor more negative attitudes toward homosexuals than women (Jenkins, Lambert and Baker, 2009; Roper and Halloran, 2007; Finlay and Walther, 2003; Whitley, Jr., 2001; Schope and Eliason, 2000; Herek and Capitano, 1999; Herek, 1988).

A review of the literature also showed that education level (Jenkins, Lambert and Baker, 2009; Herek and Capitano, 1995; Kurdek, 1988), affiliation with more liberal politics (Schulte, 2002; Herek and Capitano, 1995; Bonilla and Porter, 1990), the perception that friends share similar attitudes toward homosexuals (Schulte, 2002; Herek, 1988), and previous contact with either gay men or lesbians (Roper and Holloran, 2007; Altemeyer, 2001; Schope and Eliason, 2000; Haddock, Zanna and Esses, 1993; Herek

and Glunt, 1993) were positively correlated with attitudes. High levels of authoritarianism were found to negatively correlate (Schulte, 2002; Altemeyer, 2001; Haddock, Zanna and Esses, 1993; Herek, 1988).

An application of social learning theory to heterosexual attitudes toward homosexuals also revealed the importance of in-group/out-group dynamics in the formation of either positive or negative attitudes (Haddock, Zanna and Esses 1993; Herek, 1984b). According to a longitudinal study of Canadian university students and their parents, the socialization process and individual reactions to the expectations of others in their social circle help to explain the causes of antigay attitudes (Altemeyer, 2001). Abrams, Carter and Hogg's study of heterosexual male attitudes toward gay men determined the importance of group salience in the formation of negative attitudes toward male homosexuals, such that an in-group identity is protected through the projection of negative attitudes toward the homosexual out-group (1989). Additionally, it was found that a heterosexual male's identity felt increasingly threatened when a gay male was perceived to hold more stereotypically heterosexual traits, suggesting the important function of homosexual stereotypes in asserting differences between heterosexual and homosexual males.

Examination of the development of different approaches to the study of heterosexual attitudes toward homosexuals reveals that, over the past four decades, an increasing number of studies have accounted for the effect of the sex of the attitudinal target (either gay man or lesbian) in the construction of attitudes. The race of the respondent and the importance of differentiating between morality and civil liberties are two other recent developments in attitudinal studies, with the latter distinction enabling a

more accurate picture with regard to changes in the overall acceptance of homosexuals. A discussion of each of these developments will illustrate the progress made in the study of attitudes toward homosexuals over the past several decades, in addition to providing evidence of a continued refinement of research design and methodology with which to develop a more comprehensive, valid and reliable measurement of heterosexual attitudes.

Sex of the Attitudinal Subject: Correlates

A 1984 factor analysis conducted by Gregory Herek, which measured heterosexual attitudes toward gay men separate from those of lesbians, revealed that “the cognitive organization of attitudes toward the two target groups is qualitatively alike” (1984, pp. 47). The author’s additional finding that a bipolar Condemnation-Tolerance factor accounted for almost half of the variance in attitudes toward homosexuals supported this notion of an identical cognitive organization of attitudes, regardless of the sex of the homosexual individual.

In 1988, however, Herek contradicted these findings, suggesting that a heterosexual individual will harbor more negative attitudes toward a homosexual of their own sex. These differences were conjectured to be related to “intrapsychic conflicts,” or the development of a more negative attitude toward a homosexual of one’s own sex as a psychological defense. More specifically, Herek discussed the possibility of heterosexuals projecting their own homoerotic desires onto a target as a way to distance themselves from those feelings. Additional psychological defenses include addressing personal insecurities about one’s own sexuality through hyperconformity to gender roles and the exaggeration of differences between oneself and a homosexual individual. A 1989 study also addresses the importance of the sex of the attitudinal target in the

development of attitudes toward homosexuals, as it was determined that gay males who displayed stereotypical homosexual attributes received more positive reactions from a heterosexual male than when a gay male displayed attributes that were stereotypically heterosexual (Abrams, Carter and Hogg). In this way, a gay male's affirmation of his homosexuality through "typical" homosexual behavior served to distance him from heterosexual males, thus assuaging any threat to the latter's sexual identity.

Louderback and Whitley, Jr., have examined the sex of the attitudinal target as it relates to eroticism and heterosexual formation of less negative attitudes in a sample of heterosexual college students. The finding that heterosexual men place a high erotic value on lesbianism, and that this leads to more favorable attitudes toward this group than gay men, serves as a possible explanation for why heterosexual men consistently have shown more favorable attitudes toward lesbians than gay men (1997). The gender belief system and the marketing of lesbian pornography to men may, according to the authors, result in heterosexual men viewing lesbian sex as an act that is not truly homosexual, but rather used as a way to arouse heterosexual men. Meanwhile, the authors' findings that heterosexual women attribute very little erotic value to gay men or lesbians is consistent with more general attitudinal studies of homosexuals. Relatedly, a national telephone survey of Americans revealed that, when asked questions about lesbians first, heterosexual men showed more favorable attitudes toward gay men than when questions about gay men were asked first (Herek and Capitanio, 1999). This finding of a context effect in the formation of attitudes toward homosexuals provides further evidence for lesbianism as less of a threat to heterosexual men, and its power to also mediate the level of negativity toward gay men.

Race and Attitudes

Another more recent development in the study of heterosexual attitudes is the examination of race and its effects on the development of either favorable or unfavorable attitudes. The majority of these studies conclude that there are racial differences in the formation of attitudes toward homosexuals, and that these are most likely due to cultural differences. The results from a nationwide General Social Survey comparing Latino, black and non-Hispanic whites found Latinos to be most tolerant of homosexuals in terms of moral beliefs, yet most resistant to granting homosexuals civil liberties (Bonilla and Porter, 1990). Other studies comparing white and black heterosexual attitudes have shown mixed results. While some have concluded that African Americans express more negative attitudes toward homosexuals than whites (Schulte, 2002), other studies suggest that there is little racial difference in attitudes, but that the formation of these attitudes (that is, how they are socially constructed) may differ by race (Jenkins, Lambert and Baker, 2009; Herek and Capitanio, 1995). However, the majority of these studies do conclude that, in comparison to whites, African Americans, both male *and* female, express greater negativity toward gay males than lesbians (Schulte, 2002; Herek and Capitanio, 1995). Additionally, heterosexual African American males hold more negative attitudes toward gay males than white heterosexual men. These findings suggest that some of the variables that have been overwhelmingly associated with the formation of attitudes toward homosexuals (conservative sexual values, religiosity, and traditional gender roles) may be more salient in African American culture. While these studies have addressed the race of the respondent in determining differences in attitude formation, very few (Herek and Capitanio, 1995) address the view, prevalent among African

American communities, of homosexuality as a “white disease,” and how this conceptualization has implications for resulting attitudes toward gay men and lesbians.

Measuring Progress: Morality versus Civil Liberties

Often, studies of heterosexual attitudes are used in order to gauge the current state of acceptance of gay men and lesbians. Though it may be tempting to equate more positive attitudes with a growing acceptance, a number of scholars have addressed the importance of differentiating between attitudes related to morality versus those related to civil liberties. Consistent with a multi-dimensional conceptualization of attitudes, questions of morality address cognitive and affective dimensions, while questions regarding civil liberties tap the behavioral dimension of attitudes. Individuals who believe homosexuality to be morally wrong may still be supportive of gay and lesbian civil liberties, and vice versa, with evidence of this supported by more recent empirical research.

The distinction made between morality and civil liberties is evident in a 1990 study conducted by Bonilla and Porter comparing the attitudes of Latino, black and non-Hispanic white populations. Results showed that Latinos and whites were more tolerant than blacks on questions pertaining to morality, while whites and blacks proved more supportive of homosexual civil liberties than Latinos. A longitudinal study of attitudes toward homosexuality between 1973 and 1998 also found that Americans distinguish between morality and civil liberties such that questions about morality are read as considering homosexuality as a practice, while civil liberties questions may be regarded as asking about homosexuals as a group (Loftus, 2001). The author addresses the fact that this distinction is not unique to the homosexual population, but that issues of civil

liberties are more often about tolerance than acceptance. Fiorina has also addressed this delineation between civil liberties and morality in general American attitudes toward homosexuality, debunking the myth of a nation deeply divided on such social issues (2010). In this way, it is possible for an individual to be supportive of granting rights to homosexuals while still disliking their lifestyle. Detachment of government control from the private sector may explain why in issues of morality an individual may believe it to be wrong to be a homosexual, but how in issues of civil liberties it is wrong for the government to legislate morality.

A study of the impact of religion on the development of attitudes toward gay men and lesbians also interprets its results with consideration for the differences between civil liberties and morality. While analysis of an undergraduate population at a conservative Christian college revealed that tolerance of gay and lesbian individuals appears to be increasing, this tolerance was found to be more in the area of approving civil liberties, with evidence of a continued affirmative response to homosexuality as immoral (Finlay and Walther, 2003). Though the literature on heterosexual attitudes toward homosexuality consistently shows the measurement of attitudes on both dimensions of morality and civil liberties, distinguishing between these two dimensions is important to fully determining the current state of homosexual prejudice.

Another avenue by which perceptions of homosexuals may be understood is through an understanding of individual conceptions of gay and lesbian sexual relationships. The majority of the literature which has examined attitudes toward homosexuals has utilized close-ended questioning which is focused on how homosexuality is understood from a moral dimension. In order to extend the literature,

moving beyond initial reactions to gays and lesbians as a population is necessary. More specifically, consideration for the way in which gay and lesbian sexual relationships are understood is paramount to greater comprehension of public perception of sexually deviant relationships and consequent treatment of sexual minority populations. Given this aim, utilization of open-ended questioning in order to capture individual perceptions and ideas about gays and lesbians in-depth is essential. Such an approach enables individual thoughts and conceptions to be captured without restriction to a preselected list of answers, which cannot fully illustrate the variety and differences in individual experience with respect to understanding sexual relationships.

METHODS

Many studies of heterosexual sexual behavior and/or attitudes about homosexuality have been conducted using survey research. However, this method restricts subjects' responses given the rigid structure of these surveys, to include the use of close-ended questions. Studies of sexual behavior which provide participants a list of questions regarding possible sexual activities are operating under the assumption that (a) all individuals conceive of a sexual act (such as "intercourse") in the same way, and (b) that there is an exhaustive list of behaviors which may be considered sexual in nature. The exploratory nature of this topic suggests the impracticality of developing a survey which provides a pre-selected set of answers to questions which have not yet been asked in this particular field of research. Given that this study seeks to understand how individual conceptualize gay and lesbian sex, a topic which has not been thoroughly investigated, the use of in-depth, semi-structured interviews was the most appropriate method in which to learn as much about this complex topic as possible. Additionally, the importance of an in-depth

understanding of how an individual understands sex, and how this might be informed by larger cultural messages, begs the need for a participant to be able to communicate his or her conceptions of sex in their own words.

This study examined the conceptions of same-sex sexual behavior among college undergraduates. A great number of studies which have investigated sexual attitudes and behaviors have focused on college populations, most presumably because these individuals are easily accessible to scholars interested in this topic. Though so much of the literature on sexual behavior and attitudes have focused on this population, the decision to interview college undergraduates was made for a number of reasons, the most prominent of these being to address a gap in the literature. A great deal has been learned about what college undergraduates are taught about sex and gender, in addition to the sexual attitudes and behaviors of these individuals. However, there is virtually no understanding of how college undergraduates conceive of the sexual practices of others, particularly the sexual practices of sexual minorities. What college undergraduates learn about sex and how they apply this in their own sexual relationships and sexual attitudes has been well-documented; however, the field of sexuality research may be furthered by addressing how this population conceives of gay and lesbian sexual behavior. The decision to sample college undergraduates was also made in response to what has been studied with respect to changing conceptions about how sex is defined and understood. Focusing on a college-aged population can provide an initial glimpse into how a generation which has grown up in an era of increasing acceptance of sexual minorities understands gay and lesbian sex. For these reasons, in-depth interviews with a college

undergraduate population proved appropriate as an initial study of individual conceptualization of gay and lesbian sexual activity.

In each interview, the participant was asked to define sex and recount the process by which they learned about sex, as well as which sources were prominent in their learning experience. Such questions were formulated in order ascertain the types and kinds of messages individuals received about sex, in addition to how they themselves understood and defined it. Additionally, participants were also asked if and how their gender and their partner's gender have influenced their sexual experiences, in addition to asking participants to define sexual pleasure and their own ideas about what makes a sexual encounter pleasurable. Having gathered information about the subject's own conception of sex, participants were then asked to define gay and lesbian sex, elaborate on which sexual acts they believed each group might most often engage in, and speculate as to whether or not gay and lesbian sex could be as pleasurable as heterosexual sex. This second set of questions served to understand the subject's conception of non-heterosexual sexual relationships and how these conceptions may be informed by cultural and personal views on such relationships. The specific protocol for this study was as follows:

1. How would you define sex?
2. When did you first learn about sex? (What did you learn?)
3. Would you say that what you have learned about sex has influenced or does influence your sexual experiences? (In what ways? Does what you have learned about sex play any role in what do you do sexually, in what order, where, with whom, under what conditions, etc?)
4. What is the extent of your sexual experience? (Have you ever had sexual intercourse? If not, then what would you classify as the "furthest" you have ever gone sexually?)

5. Do you think that your gender influences your sexual experiences? How? (Do you think that gender plays a role in what your partner does sexually? Some people say they like to play around with gender when having sex. Some people do not like to play with gender during sex. Some people do not think about it at all. Have you ever “played around” with gender roles during sex? Why or why not?)
6. How do you define pleasurability? (How would you define sexual pleasurability?)
7. In your opinion, what makes a sexual encounter pleasurable? (What should a man do to make sex pleasurable? What should a woman do to make sex pleasurable?)
8. What sexual behaviors do you believe two men typically engage in? Do you think there is a particular order in which they engage in these sexual behaviors?
9. What sexual behaviors do you believe two women typically engage in? Do you think there is a particular order in which they engage in these sexual behaviors?
10. How would you define gay sex? (What sexual behaviors do you believe gay men typically engage in? Do you think there is a particular order in which they engage in these sexual behaviors?)
11. How would you define lesbian sex? (What sexual behaviors do you believe lesbians typically engage in? Do you think there is a particular order in which they engage in these sexual behaviors?)
12. Would you say that gay sex and lesbian sex are similar to each other? Different from each other? Both? In what ways?
13. Do you think that gay sex can be as pleasurable as heterosexual sex? Why or why not?
14. Do you think that lesbian sex can be as pleasurable as heterosexual sex? Why or why not?
15. Do you think there are similarities or differences in the ways that heterosexuals define pleasurability, versus how gay men define pleasurability? In what ways? (What about how lesbians define pleasurability?)
16. What do you think about gay sex? (What do you think about lesbian sex?)

Participants for this study were gathered via random sampling. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic and the general reluctance for individuals to disclose personal information to individuals whom they do not know, a non-probability sampling

technique was chosen. As per the directives of the Lehigh University Institutional Review Board, first-year undergraduate students were ineligible to participate in the study, given concerns about the sensitivity of the subject matter and its possible affects on students still acclimating to college life. Participants were recruited for participation in the study through advertising on the university's campus. This took the form of posting flyers in various public locations which students frequent, to include academic buildings, restaurants and shops, as well as through university-wide e-mail distributions. Selected classes were also informed about the study by professor or instructor distribution of flyers to students. Interested participants were asked to contact the researcher in order to set up an interview, during which time a pre-screening was conducted in order to determine if the potential participant was a current undergraduate, a non-first-year student, and a self-identified heterosexual.

Though initial intentions were to only interview individuals who identified as heterosexual, interviews with individuals who do not identify as such, but who had engaged in sexual relationships with individuals of the opposite sex, were also included. The decision to include such participants was made by the researcher with the understanding that most individuals are subject to similar cultural messages about sex and that the impact of such messages on conceptions of same-sex sexual activity would be similar to that of individuals who identify as heterosexual. Additionally, an individual's self-identification with a sexual orientation does not always match with their attractions and desires, and may also be motivated by a number of considerations (fear of ridicule as one possibility). As such, how one self-identifies is not necessarily telling of their previous sexual experiences, nor should it be used in determining one's applicability to

the study. Rather, an individual's personal experiences and interactions with larger cultural institutions and their exposure to both subtle and overt messages about sexuality were of importance to this study and were best understood through in-depth interviewing, regardless of how an individual identified.

Participants were interviewed individually in private rooms in the student center building on the university's campus. The decision to interview in a neutral location on the university's campus was driven by both IRB guidelines and researcher concern for the comfort of participating individuals. Conducting interviews in spaces where privacy was guaranteed enabled the individual to answer questions without fear of other individuals overhearing the conversation. For this reason, student spaces such as dorm rooms or common areas, while potentially areas of comfort or familiarity for participants, were not utilized. Additionally, IRB guidance for this project required conducting interviews on the university's campus in a location in close proximity to the university's Counseling Services department and the Women's Center. Concerns about the potential for upsetting an individual with discussions of sensitive subject matter, or those with histories of sexual assault or abuse, necessitated the ability for the researcher to have a source of support for participants readily at hand. Faculty and staff members in both Counseling Services and the Women's Center were made aware of the study, and both were prepared to offer support to any student who may have been upset or disturbed by the interviewing process in any way.

SAMPLE

In total, fourteen interviews with undergraduate students at a mid-sized private university in eastern Pennsylvania were conducted over the course of the Fall 2010 semester. Interviews ranged in length from forty-five minutes to two hours and took place in private conference rooms at the university. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 22. Of these interviews, four participants were male and ten were female. Eleven of the participants identified as heterosexual, one female participant identified as bisexual, and two female participants did not identify with a sexual orientation. Of the two female participants who did not identify with a sexual orientation, one had engaged in both same-sex and opposite-sex sexual relationships, while the other had engaged solely in heterosexual sexual relationships. Though participants were not asked directly about their religious affiliation, several individuals offered at one point during the interview that they were Catholic, had been raised by a Catholic family, and/or had attended a Catholic school for some portion of their education. Though statistics on the religious preferences of the student body were not available, the largest represented denomination is Catholics (the university itself, however, is nondenominational). Participants were also not asked about their socioeconomic status; however, the university from which students were sampled is predominantly middle- to middle-upper-class in make-up, and described experiences by the participants were consistent with a middle-class background. As with religious make-up, the mean income of student families was not available. Finally, the race of the participants involved in this study was not asked by the researcher. However, a few participants offered that their parents were of an ethnic minority background. Overall, the sample was comparable to the racial and ethnic diversity of the university as

a whole, and the majority of participants were white. Additional information regarding the individuals in this sample may be found in Appendix H.

With respect to the university sampled, the undergraduate population is fifty-nine percent male and forty-one percent female (University Profile, 2010). The university is predominantly white, with seventy percent of the student body identified as such. In terms of minority racial representation, seven percent of students are Hispanic, six percent Asian/Pacific Islander and four percent African American (University Office of Institutional Research Census Enrollment, Fall 2010). Politically, the school holds a reputation as a conservative institution, and the university describes itself as one of the leading research institutions in the country. The university is not a liberal arts institution, and it boasts strong programs in math, science and engineering.

Taken as a whole, the sample evoked accepting and/or tolerant views of homosexuals, and a number of participants indicated familiarity or affiliation with LGBT groups or individuals on campus, whether as allies or otherwise. It should be noted that advertisements for the study did not specifically mention gays, lesbians or homosexuality. However, the willingness to talk about sexual subject matter was most likely a major deciding factor in participants' decisions to meet with me.

With this in mind, it should perhaps not be too surprising that participants were rather open and willing to discuss their previous sexual experiences with me, as well as to answer questions regarding how they conceived of gay and lesbian sexual activity without particularly adverse reactions. This is not to suggest that discomfort, embarrassment or hesitation were nonexistent in these interviews; however, these reactions were not at the level which was expected going into the data collection process.

For the most part, interviews began with participants discussing their thoughts about the hook-up culture at their institution. If a participant was currently in a relationship, they were asked to talk generally about the relationship, to include how they met their current partner, how long they had been dating, and so on. These less controversial topics of conversation eased the participant into the interview and provided a smooth segue into the interview protocol.

Finally, a consideration for who did *not* participate is just as enlightening as considering those who did. The roughly three-to-two male-to-female ratio at the institution sampled makes this particular university unique in that males make up the majority of the student body. However, nearly three-quarters of the sample for this study were females. While the reluctance of male students to volunteer for an interview regarding topics of sexuality may seem counterintuitive, several possibilities may serve to explain the gendered divide. For one, male participants may be more hesitant to discuss sexuality if they believe that they may be asked about non-heterosexual subject matter. This possibility may have been inferred from the pre-screening interview, which asked potential participants their sexual orientation. Indeed, it has been found that males tend to have more hostile views toward homosexuality than females (Herek 1988). However, this hesitancy may also be due to participant questioning of their own sexuality (or worry that the researcher may pick up on such questioning). Illustrative of this possibility was a male participant who initially agreed to being interviewed. In his pre-interview questionnaire, he answered that he was “not sure” of his sexual orientation. After he did not show up for the scheduled interview, the researcher contacted him about scheduling another time to meet, to which the individual replied via e-mail, “Is there any way that we

could do this in a more private setting?” The individual was assured that the meeting location was in a private room, and a second interview time was scheduled. The individual never showed.

A number of scheduled interviews were never attended by interested individuals, with more males as no-shows than females, a fact even more telling of the gendered difference when it is considered that of all scheduled interviews roughly three-fourths were female. To assume the decision-making processes of those who did not show up for their scheduled interviews would be unfair. However, considering the subject matter of the interview, it is just as important to discuss who wasn't interviewed as it is to discuss who was. As an initial foray into the subject of heterosexual conceptualization of gay and lesbian sexual behavior, in-depth interviewing of a small sample of participants was important to fully understanding the ideas and conceptions of the individuals involved, as they have profound impacts for project development and sampling techniques. These initial interviews are valuable to learning about heterosexual conceptualization of homosexual behavior, and certainly may be used to guide further research.

AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY

As a researcher who approached this work from a very rigid methodological standpoint, a reflection on the evolution of this project is warranted. My interest in heterosexual conceptualization of homosexual sexual behavior has remained constant throughout the course of this project; however, my approach to researching and understanding this topic of interest was continually refined. The path in which this project has traveled and its arrival at the final product was fraught with roadblocks, challenges and revisions, all of

which in retrospect have been invaluable to the shaping of a study of which I am particularly proud.

Simon and Gagnon's theory of a sexual script was integral to the framing of this project, though in hindsight my application of this theory in the development of a research protocol and method of inquiry was too literal for an initial foray into an understudied area of sexuality research. Perhaps even more importantly, my attempts to fit participant responses to the scripting model of understanding sexual behavior constrained initial analyses through researcher fixation on how scripting applied to this research project. Indeed, a substantial number of questions during the interview addressed how participants understood sex to work, though these questions were often asked in terms of how participants imagined sex as an order-based behavior first and foremost. My frustration in finding that most individuals did not believe gay and lesbian sexual behavior to deviate significantly from this script was rooted in my expectation that heterosexuals viewed such behaviors as non-normative and therefore backwards, such that a concept of gay and lesbian sexual scripting would have looked distinctively different.

The arrival at a grounded theory approach to this project was aided by initial analyses which felt forced and empty. In my attempts to fit the data to the scripting model, I had pigeonholed my analysis and overlooked much of what participants were indicating about their sexual lives, the sexual messages they had received, and how they viewed gay and lesbian sexual relationships. Removal of these blinders involved the painful realization that my initial analyses were reaching, focused on stretching the data to preconceived notions of what I would find. Stepping back from this narrowed

viewpoint in order to truly understand participants' experiences was aided by restrictions imposed on my study by the university's Institutional Review Board. While initially I found such restrictions to be constraints on my academic freedom, in their own way they furthered the process of arriving at a grounded theory approach. More specifically, the IRB's terms for sample selection for my study necessitated a pre-screening interview and made first-year undergraduates ineligible, as previously mentioned. Such restrictions effectively limited my sample size, a factor which turned out to be more helpful than harmful.

My final sample size of fourteen individuals concerned me at first, especially in terms of deriving common themes among the interviews. It has since occurred to me that this conflation of sample size with quality is problematic, though it took the length of this research experience in order to fully understand why. My initial attempt at data analysis presupposed the recognition of commonalities which would suggest opposing scripts for heterosexuals and homosexuals. With such a frame of mind, I found that most of what these individuals were saying was overlooked as I focused on excerpts which both addressed scripting and pleasurability and suggested distinct differences based on sexual orientation. In validating these messages, I adopted an approach which was quantitatively driven, as I counted up things like how often a script was described as "normal."

After I completed my initial analysis section, I sent it to my advisor to comments, happy enough to have the section finished yet a little disappointed that my results were less insightful than I had supposed they would be. Tanya Saunders' recognition of my transfixion on scripting and my understanding of how such scripting should relate to what I would find in my data proved to be a turning point for the project. Challenged to

reanalyze the data with an open mind for what my participants were truly saying, I returned to the data once more. What emerged from additional readings was a collection of in-depth interviews which were laden with interesting anecdote and insight, and at times gave the impression of a natural line of conversation *between* participants. It was through this open-minded approach to the process that I had truly let the participants' voices be heard and drive my analysis in ways which I had not (and should not have) anticipated. In the end, I came to find, the data I had did contain some valuable insights which were revealed in the process of allowing the data to speak for itself. It is my hope that this initial study will drive subsequent examinations of in-group perceptions of out-group sexual behavior, with a particular concern for how the experiences of the individual can reveal that which has yet begun to be fully understood.

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

Each interview was transcribed by the researcher and analyzed using Atlas-ti software, utilizing a grounded theory approach to the coding process. Initially, a code was established for each question in the interview protocol, and subsequent readings of the interview transcripts enabled the researcher to pull out themes and patterns which could be examined further. The use of a grounded theory approach to analyzing the data enables the experiences of the participants to drive the analysis rather than the researcher's own preconceived notions about what they will find. This entailed reviewing the written transcript several times and keeping researcher bias in check when considering the responses of participants. The analysis and results which follow was the product of these fourteen individuals' personal experiences and stories as they were

expressed to the researcher, and reflect what these lived experiences can tell us about conceptions of gay and lesbian sexual behavior.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Defining Sex

Participant definitions of sex were diverse, ranging from more general definitions of intimate physical contact to more specific conceptions of intercourse or vaginal penetration. Perhaps most prominent was participants' beliefs that their definitions and/or views of sex were in some way different from that of others or of society in general. For some participants, this meant delineating between their conception of sex and that of medical or technical definitions. As Brent articulated,

when the penis is inserted into the vagina would be the most technical definition [of sex]. If you were to describe sex, you could describe it as a beautiful, a physical bonding... But when you define sex, like you asked define sex, so I guess that would just be pure and simple, the scientific definition.

For Brent, his view of sex as a way to intimately connect with an individual was woven into his understanding of the "technical" definition of the insertion of the penis into the vagina. The separation of personal definitions from a standard biological one was also expressed during Alexandra's recounting of her relationship with her boyfriend:

Researcher: When did it, in the course of your relationship, when did it become a sexual relationship?

Alexandra: Sex in the more like... vaginal intercourse, that type, you know, medically defined, that type of sex, like a month and a half in.

Researcher: You said defining sex in... medical terms... How would you define sex?

Alexandra: Well there's sexual activity, which is like sexual in nature, like kissing, touching... then there's... stuff that involves your privates, like oral, basically yeah, oral, anal, vaginal.

For others, their expressed understanding of a societal definition(s) of sex was separated out from their own personal conceptions:

Daria: Well I guess there's a practical definition of sex, which most people accept. But I guess for me sex is something that tends to be... definitely has an element of the erotic.

Grace: I think in general society defines sex as heterosexual intercourse. I think my definition of sex is more closer to just anything that leads to an orgasm, or doesn't, depending on choice, but anything that could, I suppose.

Kelly: I know a lot of people would probably define it as like vaginal sex. But there's also anal sex and oral sex, and those are all different kinds of sex.... I would say that it's any type of contact with genitals or other area of stimulation.

In the separating out of a “practical” or societal definition of sex from their own, these individuals suggested that a general or societal definition was too restricted to account for the variety and differing forms of sex. Indeed, the literature has addressed the ways in which young adults' conceptions of sex are changing and/or deviate from those of previous generations (Carpenter, 2005; Sanders and Reinisch, 1999). Most significantly, these understood general consensus definitions which were reevaluated parallel primary institutional messages about sex. More specifically, the family and educational institutions, which are traditionally the first lines of communication to children about sex, were often described by participants as defining sex in terms of intercourse or penile-vaginal penetration.

Participant definitions of sex, in comparison to what they had learned from the family or in schools, generally were more encompassing of a wider range of activities, behaviors and ways of feeling. Over half of the participants identified sexual acts other than intercourse as falling under the category of sex, with oral sex as the most commonly

mentioned sexual act categorized as sex. Anal sex, mutual masturbation, the use of sex toys and fingering were also identified as indicative of sex. While the physical component figured prominently in participant definitions, half of participants identified sex as also containing some element of intimacy or emotion:

Megan: I think sex is sexual intercourse, I think it's something really intimate and not to just be used. The thing is, people make it, it's become such a casual thing, where people will be like, "It's just sex."

Abigail: I say I haven't had any kind of sex because I don't know if people consider like intercourse to be sex or if like oral sex is... I know that I personally feel like it's that same sort of level of intimacy, so I would consider it sex, but I don't think that everybody feels the same way.

Even in these categorizations of sex along lines of intimacy or emotion, participants still considered that their understanding of what sex was might be different from others.

While Megan perceived sex as something others view as "a casual thing," Abigail justified her inclusion of oral sex in her definition on the basis of its level of intimacy, even though she thought that others might disagree.

A few participant definitions of sex considered both mixed-sex and same-sex relationships, though these two groups were understood to "have" sex in varying ways. Interestingly, initial definitions of sex by these participants identified lesbians as a separate group, while gay males were not mentioned. For both of those participants who mentioned lesbian sex in their definitions of sex, the absence of the penis situated their considerations of other types of sex:

Sarah: I think [sex] has a lot of different definitions.... But basically like penis in vagina, or penis in anus, I guess. Umm, but you could also, I guess if you have two women, you could have it with like I guess toys or like fingers or oral.

Carol: I think [sex] involves a much wider range of activities that usually involve physical contact but don't, probably don't necessarily have to....

Lesbian sex doesn't have to involve insertion, and certainly doesn't involve insertion of a penis. So... I think that would still count as sex.

This focus on the penis in situating definitions of sex was also prominent in participant definitions of gay and lesbian sex. Before analyzing such definitions, the process of learning about sex and the types of cultural messages participants received about the subject will be considered. An understanding of the process by which individuals are socialized to sex and sexual relationships is important, as it informs initial individual conceptions of sex, to include understandings of non-heterosexual relationships.

Cultural Messages about Sex

An analysis of messages participants received about sex revealed that family and educational institutions, while the first line of information on sexual matters, were often described as inadequate to fully explaining what individuals deemed as the most important or helpful aspects of sex education. As participants recalled the process of learning about sex, the importance of media and interpersonal relationships to providing a more thorough picture about what sex is and how it is performed became evident. In order to ascertain learned cultural messages about sex, participants were asked to recall the process by which they came to learn about sex, to include where, when and from whom or what they learned about it.

One prominent theme which emerged with regards to a participant's first exposure to information about sex from parents and schools was the consistency in which the topic was introduced in reproductive or biological terms. Consequently, these messages were often expressed in terms of the partnership of a man and a woman for the purposes of conception. When recalling learning about sex from their parents, participants often spoke in terms of reproduction and conception:

Daniel: Well, [sex] was presented to me [by my parents] in pretty much reproductive terms. So it was like, sex is something that happens when a man and a woman love each other very much, and they get naked, and the man puts his penis inside the woman's vagina... and impregnates her, and then the baby forms in her uterus and is born nine months later.

Kelly: When I was a kid, I would ask how babies were made and stuff. And they would always say, "Well God just knows when two people want to have a baby." But when I was in fifth grade my parents actually described the act as like a man putting his penis inside a woman's vagina, so they were pretty specific about it.

Researcher: Did your parents ever talk to you about sex?

Brent: Yeah... they talked to me about like the penis in the vagina and the reproduction thing.

Parental focus on the reproductive function of sex not only introduced a heteronormative conception of sexual relationships and sexual behavior, but limited participant understanding of what sex was comprised of to penile-vaginal intercourse. These first-line communications about sex between parents and their children are important in the process of socialization to sex and sexual relationships, and may have a significant impact in terms of informing individual notions of what a normal or abnormal sexual act is. Studies which have examined individual definitions of sex have shown that such definitions often include acts other than intercourse; however, it should be noted that individuals often reported *other* agents of socialization as the most informative sources of education about sex.

In terms of the institution of education, several participants offered at some point during the interview that they had attended Catholic schools for all or some portion of their education, or that they had participated in CCD (Confraternity of Christian Doctrine) classes. It is safe to assume that what is said or isn't said about sex within religiously-affiliated schools is influenced by the religious denomination's stance on sex.

In this case, the Catholic Church's position on sex before marriage is prominent, among other things. For many of the participants, school education about sex was described as limited, uninformative and/or negative, regardless of whether or not the individual had attended Catholic school. Those who had attended Catholic schools described the curriculum as emphasizing consequences, teaching students to not have sex before marriage without actually covering the act of sex itself:

Daria: I went to a Catholic school, so it was all about, my remaining question after sex ed was, "How do people have sex?" It was a joke.... I mean we also had sex ed in high school. None of the exciting bits of sex, mostly just how to not get pregnant or not get STDs.

Marie: [My Catholic school] didn't really educate us that well because their whole point is like don't have sex before marriage. So... we'd have auditoriums and they would just like almost scare us away from it, and bring in people that say like "Sex is bad, don't do it." And like have these stories where people would say they had sex and then regret it.

These messages about sex as described by participants suggest that their educational institutions (in these cases, Catholic schools) transmitted cultural messages about sex which were sanitized. Stated another way, Catholic schools emphasized the consequences of engaging in sex, which coincided with their "wait until marriage" message.

Similar experiences were also described by those who did not attend Catholic school, though these schools were more likely to address biological processes and safe sex practices than their Catholic counterparts. Nevertheless, participant recounts of sex education in their schools suggest the educational institution's desire to keep knowledge about sex limited to the reproductive or health-related aspects:

Kelly: So they didn't actually teach us anything about sex, just all the consequences that can happen if you don't have safe sex. It wasn't until high school that they actually went into details about like what exactly happens, we watched some video about like conception.

Researcher: Did you have the sex education course at school?

Abigail: Umm, yeah, but it was mostly just based on like different diseases that you could get, like we never practiced putting a condom on a banana. Like I don't know how to do that, you know? So it was very much just about like "don't do this" and then it'd fast-forward to like "these are the consequences" and like actual sex was completely not covered.

As Kelly and Abigail offered, a consequences-based approach to teaching about sex in their schools presented a point of similarity between Catholic and non-Catholic school curriculums, though non-religiously affiliated institutions were more likely to address topics such as conception. These reflections on sex education within schools as being less than helpful often paralleled parental messages about sex as described by study participants, and were consistent with previous findings regarding parent and educator approaches to sex education.

However, participant reflection on how their own personal sexual experiences have been shaped by what they learned about sex revealed that messages from the family and school institutions were influential regarding emotions and attitudes toward sex. Several participants discussed that what they had learned about sex influenced their sexual experiences and sexual relationships in terms of ideas about their self-worth and when it was appropriate to engage in a sexual relationship. For example, Carol explained that "[sex is] not something where you're looking for rewards, which I think has played out in the way that I act sexually." Similar responses were also given by others:

Alexandra: I mean, [what I learned about sex] definitely influenced my attitudes about it, when it's ok to have it. Like it was certainly a conscious choice to have it within the confines of a relationship... Sex isn't a bargaining tool. It's between two people, it's an expression of love, that's what my parents told me.

Researcher: Do you feel like that message about [sex] being a serious thing came out more in literature than in maybe TV or...?

Anthony: I don't think I got any of it being serious from any of them. I got it being serious from my mother... I wouldn't feel the way that I do about sex if I wasn't open and didn't have open dialogues with my family about it. And they're definitely the ones that I feel, like, they're the reason that I have the mentality I do about sex. Which is that it is a big deal, and it's not something that you know, you should just do regularly with someone you don't care about.

These shared concessions about the importance of family communications about sex as it related to the formation of relationships suggest the importance of parental involvement in their child's sex education. However, the value of family communications lay largely in participant understanding about emotions and sex as an expression of commitment or love. While individuals in this study may have considered what they learned about the physical aspects of sex from their parents to be simplistic or focused solely of reproduction, the messages they received from families about the emotions associated with engagement in sexual relationships appeared to be of value to them.

As Anthony mentioned in his response above, the highly visible mass media and its communication of cultural messages about sex also figured prominently in participants' discussions, with every participant naming some media source, to include television, movies, internet, and magazines, when recalling the process of learning about sex. However, media messages about sex and its purpose(s) were often described in terms which contrasted with those communicated by parents or the educational system. More specifically, participants described the media message as more transfixed on the entertaining or "fun" aspects of sex while downplaying the emotional or love-based aspects. Abigail described television as perpetuating "the idea of casual sex being

completely normal.... I feel like the media sort of portrays it as not being something that needs to be particularly valued.” For Brent “in pornography it’s more mechanical than it is emotional.... Because you know, they’re just fucking.” Additionally, the media was also described as offering more explicit messages in terms of how sex is performed and how to attract potential sexual partners:

Daria: I think [what I’ve been taught about sex] has to do with a lot of visual culture too, cause that’s what you really see. Like positions, like sexual positions, you kind of learn from the movies or from literature if you want to call it that. [laughs] Yes, so I feel like visual culture has a lot to do with it.

Researcher: You said that [media] contributes to the social understanding of sex. What do you mean by that specifically?

Marie: Just that like if two people like each other then in order to like keep it going they’ll like hook-up and then have sex and then it’ll be great the next day and they’ll stay together.

Media’s influence in educating participants was described in a manner which suggests that these sources were “filling in the gaps” on subject matter that was either never breached, never discussed or too uncomfortable to address with parents or in school health classes. Often the use of media in order to learn about aspects of sex to which participants were either curious or wanted to know more about was described in terms of “doing my own research.” Participants relayed that what they had learned about sex from these major sources was influential in its applicability to their sexual lives, with additional knowledge built up through actual sexual experience. When asked specifically what they had learned from media that had been influential in their experiences, participants often referred to the visual media as offering guidance on the physical components of sex:

Kelly: We see sex scenes in movies and like if you watched porn, which I did when I was learning about sex, you see how it's supposed to be done. So you kind of like try to imitate that.

Brent: Sexual positions... I learned about them pretty much through the internet... you can look up stuff there.

Novels and magazines were also named by participants as fruitful sources in terms of learning about the physical side of sex.

Also figuring prominently in participant influences on sexual relationships were interpersonal relationships. More specifically, participants often spoke of conversations with friends and/or their own sexual experiences with partners as sources from which to shape, adapt, or supplement the cultural script as they became intimate with others. As Sarah described it,

As far as like what I've learned about sex, the majority has been through my own like figuring things out. Of course feedback from my partners. Like I said, some research, and just I have a large enough sample size to be like, "Ok, most people like this." [laughs] "This is like something I should continue or not continue," stuff like that.

Though Sarah reflects on her extensive sexual history as a way in which to determine which sexual behaviors are best received by her partners, others also described their current or previous sexual relationships as highly influential to learning about how sex goes, as well as figuring out what they most desired for themselves and for their partners:

Daniel: At least both of our behaviors when we first started having sex was more in keeping with the, you know, that traditional, the guy does the heavy lifting the girl shouts a lot kind of thing. And then it turned out that wasn't exactly, that wasn't really what either of us enjoyed the most... when we discovered something that was better than what we were doing, we did that.

Researcher: Would you say that, having reflected on places that you've learned about sex, would you say that what you had learned about sex influenced or continues to influence your sexual experiences?

Beverly: I'd say because I'm still with Jordan, and Jordan's the main person that I learned about all of this from, I would say that at this point, like I'm starting to gain my own opinion on things. And we're definitely becoming more open with each other about things that we want out of our sexual relationship...we just have to be together just a little bit longer I feel like, and then we're gonna start seeing what each other wants more, know what I mean?

Both Daniel and Beverly reflected on working together with their partners to make the experience more enjoyable for them through open lines of communication.

For others, this process included learning from previous sexual relationships in which they came to find out what they did *not* want. For example, Marie discussed how her decision to sleep with a former boyfriend after he continually pressured her helped to reevaluate what she wanted out of a sexual relationship:

I definitely view it more seriously I guess, since [that relationship] freshman year. I think it should be, you should be in a relationship that you care about someone and... yeah, I don't, I'm not as so into like that marriage part of it. But I think I at least like to wait about five months if I'm in a relationship.

Anthony also described a similar experience in which he had a sexual relationship with a woman as a rebound from a break-up. For him, the experience

opened my eyes to, you know, how I realized how for me I would definitely need to be in a committed, I don't feel comfortable having sex with someone, or being intimate with someone, unless I'm really interested in them as a person emotionally.

Drawing from prior sexual experiences and the emotions associated with those experiences, Anthony came to realize for himself when he could comfortably engage in an intimate relationship with another individual.

In juxtaposing the influence of media and interpersonal relationships with that of schools and families, the silencing or censoring of certain sexual subject matter by the latter two sources becomes salient when considering the experiences of non-heterosexual identified individuals. The role of media and interpersonal interactions in providing as-yet unheard of viewpoints and possibilities figured prominently for participants who did not identify as heterosexual individuals. More specifically, two participants described learning about gays and lesbians through sources other than parents or schools, which for them was both eye-opening and validating:

Kelly: As a kid, I would make comments sometimes, like “Can I marry a girl when I grow up?” or something, just out of curiosity. And [my parents] would say well no, that’s not something you can do, that’s not normal... So I grew up with this expectation, like it just wasn’t even an idea in my mind. So it was kind of confusing when I did start to have sexual feelings about women, because I didn’t really identify them as something valid.

In recounting parental messages about sex, Kelly, a self-identified bisexual, stated that reactions to her questions about marrying an individual of the same sex were not validated as something acceptable or desirable. In fact, Kelly credited the media and interpersonal relationships to her realization that same-sex relationships were possible, and that she was not singular in her experiences:

I think definitely the internet helped educate me a lot more about that. And I actually started to learn more about homosexuality and actually come into contact with other gay people, so once that had happened I realized that wow, ok, this is actually something that is valid and that I maybe shouldn’t be ashamed about, so maybe those thoughts did mean something.

Grace, who did not identify with a sexual orientation but who at the time of the interview was in a long-term relationship with a woman, also spoke of the media and

experiences with other individuals as central to learning more about the homosexual sexual experience:

I didn't even have a grasp of same-sex relationships or same-sex sex acts at all until high school. I started to meet people who identified with the LGB community... I guess like what I learned about same-sex sexual relationships basically was a gradual, learn-as-we-go kind of thing. I had been in kind of an on-again, off-again relationship with a girl during high school that was sexual. And that was basically like where my knowledge base came from... And I kind of like through her I got exposed to more literature, a lot of young adult fiction was definitely probably a basis of a lot of my knowledge started coming from like teen LGBT-themed novels.

In their identification as non-heterosexual individuals, both Kelly and Grace present a contrasting view and way of understanding an individual's learning process with respect to sex. For these two women, their felt desire for individuals of the same sex and the associated process of forging same-sex sexual relationships were made difficult by dominant cultural messages received by the schooling and family institutions which excluded mentioning of such relationships. In this way, media and interpersonal relationships with individuals who identified as gay or lesbian were important to both validating feelings of same-sex desire and to learning a script which was not based on dominant cultural conceptions of sexual relationships as occurring between a man and a woman.

Receiving Gendered Messages

Cultural messages about sex and how these inform interpersonal sexual relationships are important to considering how scripts on both of these levels may inform ideas about gay and lesbian sexual relationships. Previous research has shown that gendered messages are complementary to those which reflect heteronormative structures (Pascoe, 2007; Hartley and Drew, 2001). Perhaps of greatest prominence in participant

reflections on how gender had influenced their sexual experiences was the discussion of a dominant/submissive dichotomy. This was evident in Daniel and Beverly's comments in the previous section about how their relationships had changed over time, with Daniel coming to find that he did not necessarily have to keep with the gender-specific sexual role in which "the guy does the heavy lifting [and] the girl shouts a lot." For Beverly, her recognition of her partner as the one who taught her about sex and her statement that "I'm starting to gain my own opinion on things" suggest that her male partner directed the early portions of their sexual relationship, but that as the relationship has grown she has come to prioritize her needs and desires as a woman. In both of these examples, initial adherence to a dominant male/submissive female model appears to have been drawn from an understanding of distinct gender roles in sexual relationships. However, interpersonal experiences were articulated as influential to amending their thoughts on these culturally-defined roles. Though participants did not explicitly discuss where they came to learn this dichotomy from, previous research has discussed the gendered messages which permeate major social institutions (Hartley and Drew, 2001; Frey and Hojjat, 1998; O'Sullivan and Byers, 1992). The role of the dominant male and the submissive female were consistently discussed by participants, regardless of whether or not they believed those roles applied to their own sexual experiences:

Daniel: I assumed it was my role to be the one who was initiating and sustaining the sexual intercourse. Later on, and with other people, that wasn't necessarily true, but at least at first it was.

Kelly: I think that especially if I'm having sex with a man, I don't know, there's kind of an expectation that he should be the more dominant one, that he should be the one initiating sex and wanting the sex.

Anthony: I feel like being a male, I have not, and I don't necessarily agree with this way, I just think it's the way it is. I feel like I have more control

over if I have sex with someone or not... I just feel like as a man, you're more in control of actually, you know, the path that leads to sex.

As males, both Daniel and Anthony reflected on culturally-prescribed gender roles within the context of sexual relationships, such that they felt more in control or given to initiating sexual contact. However, Kelly, in keeping with this understanding of the dominant-submissive dichotomy, expected her male partners to both initiate and want sex more than her.

Additionally, participants often discussed the sexual double standard when considering how gender has influenced their sexual experiences, as well as the experiences of their partner(s). Female participants were apt to mention how males have fewer restrictions and/or consequences for their sexual actions than women, such that women feel greater societal pressure to maintain standards of conservatism in their sexual relationships. As Sarah reflected on her sexual history, "I would tend to be judged for my sexual experiences because of the ridiculous double standard that's in place in our culture." For Daria, differing expectations for males and females figured in her perceptions of her boyfriend's comfort level with regards to his sexuality:

I mean he definitely thinks with his penis sometimes. I'm just gonna say it. I think it... I think he maybe feels more open about being sexual. I feel like sometimes, and this may be unfair to him, but that it's less complicated for him. And that may be most likely a product of just how men are taught about sex and about their own bodies, and having sex.

Male participants, however, identified pressures associated with sexual relationships as stemming from their friendships with other males, with an emphasis on physical performance. For James, "I think that there's definitely more of a drive for men to push other men to hook up and focus solely on that rather than asking, "Hey, do you think you could form an actual emotional bond with this girl?" That kind of conversation never

really comes up.” Brent, who was in a relationship with a woman at the time of the interview, reflected on how he sought advice from his male friend about how to improve his sexual performance:

My sexual experience with my girlfriend, she doesn't come to climax during sex. Granted, there's like a large population of women who don't climax during sex. Fair. I don't last very long during sex. Fair. But I was talking to my friend about it, and he's like maybe next time just try working her up more. Until like she's going to get to a point where you're not going to go so quickly that she'll be able to finish before you.

Such advice reflects a shared conception of males as gatekeepers of women's potential to orgasm, with the resultant responsibility that Brent must be more cognizant of “working up” his girlfriend. Brent's articulation that he does not last long during sex led him to seek out advice from a male friend who presumably relates to this felt male pressure to perform, which is often measured temporally.

The dominant/submissive theme and notions of a double standard in gendered messages about sex as described participants was considered within the context of male-female relationships as the norm, with males as the dominant figures within these relationships. These heteronormative and gendered messages as understood and experienced by the individual may inform sexual schemas regarding gay and lesbian relationships. The relationship of cultural messages to individual conceptions of non-heterosexual sex will first be considered with respect to how participants defined gay sex, followed by definitions of lesbian sex.

Defining Gay Sex

Regardless of whether or not it was addressed in their initial definitions of sex, participants were also asked to define gay sex. For the most part, definitions of gay sex

tended to parallel initial definitions of sex, with several participants noting that they would define gay sex in the same or about the same way that they defined sex in general:

Researcher: How would you define gay sex?

James: Probably the same way [as sex]. Anything that has a high likelihood of causing climax and is significantly more intimate.

Alexandra: I guess like activity involving genitals. Same thing as heterosexual people, stuff going on below the belt. Contact of genitals.

Over half of participants initially identified gay sex using a gender qualifier. That is, initial definitions of gay sex were vague and often stated as two individuals of the same gender or sex engaging in some type of sexual activity or sexual behavior. When asked to elaborate on what was meant by sexual acts, participants identified the same range of activities as they had indicated for their initial definitions of sex. The most commonly mentioned sexual behaviors for two men were oral and anal sex. In this way, gay sex was also understood to encompass a variety of behaviors, with the major difference being the sex or gender of the individuals involved, rather than the behaviors themselves.

The parallels between general definitions of sex and gay sex are significant for a number of reasons. For one, the identification of multiple sexual acts as indicative of sex suggests that the equation of sex with vaginal-penile intercourse as communicated by major social institutions is rather rigid in focus compared to individual sexual schemas. Secondly, the sample majority's view of gay sex as being different only in the sense of the gender or sex of the participants points to a conception of sexual relationships which are understood and defined on the basis of gender, rather than solely by sexual orientation.

The influence of gender on conceptions of sexual relationships was made evident by participants "substituting" for vaginal-penile intercourse in gay sexual relationships.

This suggests the primacy of the penis in conceptions of intercourse, as consideration for the absence of a vagina in definitions of gay sex were secondary to the mentioning of the presence of a penis or sexual behaviors dependent on the presence of one. As such, anal sex was consistently discussed in participant conceptions of gay sexual behavior, and the anus was often explicitly mentioned as a substitute for the vagina. When asked what kinds of sexual behaviors two men might engage in, Brent replied, “I don’t actually know. But out of assumptions because it’s like, well I have sex with a female and I put my penis in her vagina, so you always typically hear about anal sex between two men.” In his conceptualization, Brent draws on both his personal experiences with sex as well as what he “typically hears” in order to ascertain sexual behavior between two men. Combining what is understood as typical with his own personal experiences of putting his penis in a vagina, Brent identifies another orifice as a site for the penis to penetrate in sexual relationships where a vagina is not present. Megan’s thought process in coming to a definition of gay sex also posits the penis as central to conceptions of intercourse, with the understanding that a penis is present enabling the identification of sites of penetration:

Researcher: How would you define gay sex?

Megan: Same-sex couple having sex... me defining [sex] as intercourse. Yeah... it would be sex for them because that would be what their intercourse would be.

Researcher: What would their intercourse be?

Megan: Anal sex or like oral sex. I guess maybe between two girls it’d be a little different because you don’t have actual penetration....

In this instance, the anus or mouth was identified as the site of penile penetration for gay men, enabling an intercourse equivalent to heterosexual relationships. In her consideration of lesbian sex, Megan made it evident that the penetrative capability of the penis is a primary condition to identifying an act as sex. In this way, the gay male’s

ability to penetrate another male's anus or mouth is sufficient to labeling such an act as intercourse "for them." Megan's understanding of a lack of penetrative capability in lesbian sexual relationships was consistently mentioned by other participants as troubling the ability to define lesbian sex.

Defining Lesbian Sex

Compared to participant definitions of gay sex, definitions of lesbian sex were more varied and at times more difficult to articulate. As in their considerations of heterosexual and gay sexual relationships, participants also described multiple and varied sexual behaviors that lesbians might engage in. Some of these behaviors were described as specific to lesbian relationships, to include vaginal-vaginal rubbing, though oral sex and manual stimulation were also frequently mentioned. However, when asked to define lesbian sex specifically, participants' difficulties in articulating a definition of lesbian sex affirmed the penis as major component in defining sex. In this way, articulating the "intercourse equivalent" was the site of contention or difficulty in definitions of non-heterosexual sex. The presence or absence of the penis and its centrality in defining sex was evident in definitions of lesbian sex, which suggests the primacy of gender and biological capability to understanding sexual behavior. Such findings were present throughout the interviews, regardless of the sexual orientation of the participants. For Kelly, a bisexual,

It's really, it's trickier [to define a sexual act] for lesbian women and women who have sex with women because there's not such a fine line. Like usually with straight people, sex is like when the penis goes in the vagina. But for lesbian women, it's like, like there's some people that I'm not sure whether or not I could say that I had sex with them because maybe clothes were taken off and like there was some feeling around, but like, but I'm not sure I would call it sex..... I guess it all depends personally if you feel like it was sex, then it was.

For Kelly, the penetrative moment in heterosexual sexual relationships marks a definitive boundary between an act which could be classified as sex and one which could not be classified as such. However, her inability to draw on this moment when she considered her relationships with women makes delineating between what is sex and what is not more difficult. Additionally, Kelly identified personal conceptions of sex as driving these delineations in her mention of whether or not one “feels” as if they had sex.

Several self-identified heterosexual participants also articulated their difficulty in defining lesbian sex:

Brent: It’s so easy to define when there’s a penis involved... well you’ve lost the penis now, and you’ve lost the something inserting into some other orifice... I’m gonna go on a limb and say there isn’t lesbian sex. Unless... at the same time... there’s no lesbian sex with only the human body being involved... you could define lesbian sex with uses of dildos or strap-ons or what-not. It’s almost like I want it to be more of like penis in a hole to be sex.

Alexandra: ... contact of genitals. If I could figure it out. I don’t know... I don’t know how they do anything involving penetration, I guess that’s what I’m saying. And maybe they don’t.

Marie: I guess anal sex, no, not anal sex. Oral sex, but... yeah, I guess not as heavily as I would heterosexually.

Researcher: Not as heavily?

Marie: Like, not, I guess between a man and a woman because they can have normal sex.

Each of these individual’s articulations of difficulty in understanding or defining lesbian sex suggests a similar understanding of sex as involving the presence of penetration by a penis. As the quotes above demonstrate, definitions of lesbian sex became troubled largely because of the absence of a penis, leading participants to address the fact that something was “lost,” difficult to figure out, or incapable of being “normal” (given that

“normal” to Marie was drawn from her initial definition of sex as “having intercourse with someone... I don’t really classify oral sex as having sex...” and, later, her response that “normal sex” involved a male-female partnership).

Additionally, analyses suggest that the presence of two penises is more conducive to developing a definition or conceptualization of gay sex than the presence of two vaginas in the case of lesbian sex. As Brent described, the “penis in a hole” model is easily applied in the conceptualization of gay sex, given the presence of an anus which can be substituted for the vagina. Indeed, anal and oral sex were often mentioned in definitions of gay sex, both of which are acts in which the penis is penetrating an orifice. For Grace, a 21-year-old female who did not identify with a sexual orientation but had engaged in both same-sex and mixed-sex sexual relationships, the difficulty in defining lesbian sex was experienced both personally as well as through conversations with others:

I feel like in terms of, you know, like how society defines heterosexual sex as intercourse between a man and a woman, I feel like if I had give a standard definition, it would be a million times easier to say well gay men have anal sex, but no one really knows what lesbians do, ever. I mean, I’ve had people just ask me [in reference to her same-sex relationship], “Well, how do you have sex?” Like, well... what day of the week is it? [laughs] I don’t know, it doesn’t... I feel like it’s a lot less definable simply because society defines sex as the penetration, as penetration basically. So, because there’s no penis usually, I mean no natural penis, in a same-sex female relationship, it’s a lot less easy to define.

This quote exemplifies the differences in definitions of gay and lesbian sex, not solely on the basis of lesbian sex being more difficult while gay sex is “a million times easier” to articulate, but on the basis of the lack of penetration as proving troublesome in defining sexual activity in which there is no authentic phallus present.

Perhaps even more curious when considering the previously quoted definitions of lesbian sex is that the use of fingers or other body parts as having insertive capabilities was not mentioned. Though the insertion of fingers was mentioned as one type of sexual behavior that two women might engage in, this behavior was not described as indicative of sex. Rather, the suggestion of a penis substitute that is similar in size and shape (for example, Brent's mentioning of a strap-on, and Grace describing that there is no "natural penis" in lesbian sex) figured prominently in these definitions of lesbian sex. As with definitions of gay sex, this suggests that the physiological capabilities of the individual involved and the relation of these capabilities to concepts of gender are perhaps more integral to definitions of sex than sexual orientation. Stated another way, the association of the penis with the male gender suggests that definitions of sex are less centered on sexual orientation than on gender. In this way, beyond influencing what is present or happens in sexual relationships, patriarchy also controls how individuals think about sex, such that the penis-in-vagina model is less informative to sexual schemas than a sex/gender system in which the male is the dominant penetrator and the female the submissive recipient. Related to this is the privileging of the male body within a patriarchal system which places the male genitalia at the center of individual schemas about sexual relationships. Consequently, the male penis' ability to become erect and ejaculate mark the beginning and culmination of a sexual encounter and serve to determine whether or not an act was actually sex, with the initial understanding that sex is defined on the basis of whether or not a penis is present. Participant difficulty in imagining or defining a sexual act without a phallus present supports the impact of

patriarchy on conceptions of sex, and raises questions of the implications this has for female pleasure (or abstract understanding of female pleasure) in sexual relationships.

Indeed, the mentioning of sex toys was almost always discussed during considerations of lesbian sexual relationships as opposed to gay or heterosexual relationships. The salience of toy use in lesbian relationships continues with the theme of substituting within homosexual relationships, as gay men were often described as substituting the anus for the vagina when engaging in anal sex. While cultural images or representations of lesbian relationships may have informed participant ideas about for whom toys are typically used, the frequent discussion of a dildo or strap-on as specific types of toys used in lesbian relationships distinguishes them as specifically tailored to sexual relationships in which a penis is absent. This idea is reflected in Abigail's response that lesbians "maybe would use like toys or whatever to sort of substitute for the penis." Some participants discussed their mentioning of dildo or strap-on use by lesbians due to media constructions of lesbian sexual behavior. For example, Carol discussed that "the media portrayal of lesbians has been, you know, there are women that use strap-ons and stuff... whereas media portrayal of gay men, it's unnecessary for them to." In describing her notion of lesbian sexual behavior, Carol draws on media images which are described as focused on the use of strap-ons. Her mentioning of toy use as "unnecessary" for gay men suggests that media depiction of gay and lesbian sexual relationships constructs such relationships in ways which emphasize the penis as the necessary object with which to conceive of a sexual relationship. In this way, the female body's possession of a vagina and clitoris, and the potential for pleasure to be elicited from them, is of little consequence if a penis is not present.

Understanding Sexual Pleasure

Definitions of sexual pleasure were generally given with consideration to corporal effects. That is, participants generally defined sexual pleasure as consisting of a physical response, physical sensations or an achieved state of arousal. Interestingly, only two participants, both of whom were male, considered achievement of an orgasm as part of their definition of sexual pleasure. Additionally, consideration of sexual pleasure as being genital-based in focus was only mentioned by a few participants.

For the majority of the sample, sexual pleasure was often described in very broad terms and encompassed more than just genital contact. For example, Brent described sexual pleasure as

more of a physical stimulation, especially of sensitive genitalia areas, and/or other pleasurable areas on the body, if not the whole body. So yeah, I guess sexual pleasure derives from that, it doesn't have to be the penis and the vagina, because a sexual activity can extend into kissing, and foreplay activities, and whatever else.

Brent's definition parallels other participant definitions of sex in his differentiation between sexual activity and sex. In this case, both sex and sexual activity are capable of eliciting sexual pleasure in much the same way that sex was understood to encompass a variety of activities not exclusive of intercourse.

When asked what makes a sexual encounter pleasurable, participant responses attached importance to a number of factors, the first of these being partner interaction. In particular, participants identified mutual consent, an equal exchange between partners, and physical attraction as contributing to a pleasurable sexual experience. As Carol expressed, a sexual encounter is made pleasurable when there is "a fairly equal exchange between partners... not necessarily of specific acts or of even necessarily time, but of

attention paid to both persons,” while James considered a pleasurable sexual encounter as when “one sees the other individual as sexually attractive and they are able to have a physical sexual response.”

Relatedly, participants often spoke of pleasurable sexual encounters as facilitated by an emotional connection between partners. Some participants considered the possibility for trust and/or the comfort level between partners to be separate from emotions; however, these were also considered necessary components for a pleasurable sexual experience. As Megan explained, “I think [sexual pleasure] has to be emotional too, because it definitely makes a difference I think, when you’re emotionally invested with someone to be with them. But there is something physical literally happening to you with pleasure,” while Grace described that “I think there are so many things that go into [a pleasurable sexual experience]. I think starting with like a good relationship between the people... just enough that there’s a sense of trust and comfort.... I don’t wanna say emotional bond necessarily, but that basis for comfort.”

Achievement of orgasm also became more pronounced in participant considerations for what makes for a pleasurable sexual encounter. While the presence of an orgasm was noted as a physical reaction which would make for a pleasurable experience, nearly all participants who mentioned orgasm also specified that this was not necessary for a pleasurable experience. Participants described this in ways very similar to that of Kelly, who stated “there doesn’t necessarily have to be an orgasm, because I think you can still have a pleasurable sexual encounter without that. It would probably make it more pleasurable, but it’s not a requirement, I don’t think.” Thus, while the presence or absence of an orgasm was discussed more often when considering what makes a sexual

encounter pleasurable as compared to defining sexual pleasure, the possibility of enjoying a sexual encounter was not contingent upon achievement of orgasm for these individuals. With consideration to participant understandings of what constitutes a pleasurable sexual experience, sexual pleasure was understood to originate in bodily sensations but to be further heightened by the nature of partner interactions, to include physical exchanges as well as emotional bonds or significant levels of trust and/or comfort. These general circumstances were dominant in participant answers, while references to particular sexual acts were almost non-existent.

When asked to consider their own understandings of gendered prescriptions or expectations which would contribute to pleasurable sexual encounters, participants made little differentiation between male and female expectations. This understanding of a non-gender specific script for eliciting pleasure in one's sexual partner is interesting given participant transfixion on physical differences when defining gay and lesbian sex. For Anthony, physiological differences were discussed in terms of male and female achievement of orgasm and his understanding of the need for such an achievement:

I guess it's just the way the anatomy is, like sex for a girl doesn't have to end in an orgasm to be pleasurable. And I feel that's definitely the case, because you know, I guess just the actual motion, the action, the friction is good enough. Like if it doesn't end in orgasm it's ok because like the experience was still just as good, whereas with... guys it's like a build-up, and it's like gets you really pumped for *it*, and when *it* doesn't come, that's really upsetting. But for girls I feel like it's more like even. Like it's an even pleasure, and then there's the big boom, but if there's not that big boom they still have this... like it's not gradual, I feel.

This greater transfixion on the male orgasm, to include the belief that the male orgasm is more easily achieved, is consistent with previous research (Bogart, Cecil, Wagstaff, Pinkerton and Abramson, 2000). However, when participants were asked separate

questions about what a man or woman should be doing to make sex pleasurable, responses did not consider perceived physiological differences in capability to feel or experience sensations during sexual encounters. Rather, both men and women were understood to have similar (or even the same) “responsibilities” in making sex pleasurable for their partner. Of considerable importance were open lines of communication between partners (verbal or otherwise), and a focus on the partner’s pleasure in addition to their own:

James: I think that the best kind of sexual experience is the one where both individuals know exactly what they want, they communicate it well to each other, and they work in a mutual manner to achieve that for each other.

Sarah: I feel like the best sexual partners are those who are more concerned with your pleasure than their own. And ideally both partners will feel that way.

The importance of communication was paramount in participant considerations of what men and women should be doing to make a sexual encounter pleasurable, as opposed to the naming of particular sexual acts that a man or woman should be performing.

Considering Gay and Lesbian Sexual Pleasure

Participant considerations of sexual pleasure and what makes a sexual encounter pleasurable revealed conceptions which emphasized mutual satisfaction and partner communication. Additionally, these conceptions of pleasure did not contain heavily gendered messages. Participants were asked whether or not gay sex and lesbian sex could be as pleasurable as heterosexual sex, with the premise that all individuals in the sample had identified as heterosexual (or, if they did not identify as such, that they had at least engaged in a sexual relationship with an individual of the opposite sex). Such a line of questioning sought to understand how their conceptions of sexual pleasure informed

perceptions of the pleurability of gay and lesbian sex. The consistent themes expressed in answers to both gay and lesbian sexual pleasure will be discussed together. Ways in which gay and lesbian sexual pleasure were discussed as distinct from one other and/or from heterosexual sex will be then be considered.

As a group, the sample considered gay and lesbian sex to be just as pleasurable (or just as capable of pleasure) as heterosexual sex. Consistent throughout participant answers was the understanding that pleasure is derived from preference and desire, rather than from cultural standards of right and wrong. Though not expressed in exactly these terms, participant responses reflected the pleurability of an action as an individual preference, and therefore not inhibitive to achieving pleasure in non-heterosexual sexual relationships. As participants described it,

Kelly: If you're a gay person then for you gay sex is gonna be more pleasurable than heterosexual sex because you're not going to be turned on by having sex with someone of the opposite sex.

Megan: [It's] what they find pleasurable. Because I've heard from some gay friends and gay men on TV, like having sex with a woman doesn't do anything for them. And yeah, it might be physically something because of what you're doing to that sexual area, but there's no connection there, it's just not there.

This focus on individual attractions and desires as necessary to experience sexual pleasure parallels Simon and Gagnon's identification of an intrapsychic script which consists of individually felt desires and fantasies. These participant responses suggest that the cultural attitudes toward homosexual relationships do not factor into their understanding of gays and lesbians' abilities to experience pleasure as prominently as the importance of individual-level preferences and desires.

Another consistent consideration by participants was that of the “advantage” that gays and/or lesbians had in that their sexual partners share the same anatomy. For these participants, the fact that both participants shared the “same parts” could potentially contribute to or elicit the potential for greater pleurability, or make the achievement of sexual pleasure easier:

Marie: Two girls can... well... kind of understand where they're coming from and know what the other partner needs. I'd say the same for males too. Like they both understand, they can kind of know like what points to hit.

Carol: I think gay sex does have the advantage of... your partner having the same parts as you... physically. And then like, knowing generally if they're comfortable or aware of themselves in knowing how to work those parts.

Participants, however, did not consider the factor of corporal familiarity to be something which could make gay or lesbian sex *more* pleasurable than heterosexual sex. Rather, as Carol explained, “I think the learning curve is smaller.”

The presence of the “same parts” was also influential to considerations of the sexual behaviors in which gays and lesbians might engage, and is consistent with participant emphasis on the physiology of the participants involved (and how this is consistently conflated with gender). While participants generally described gay and lesbian sex as being capable of similar levels of pleasure as heterosexual sex, the absence of a penis in lesbian relationships was often mentioned when responding to the question. This is significant, given that the absence of a vagina in gay male relationships was not mentioned during participant considerations of the potential for pleasure in those relationships. These responses were consistent with participant definitions of gay and

lesbian sex. Sarah described the absence of a penis in lesbian relationships as actually less limiting than in gay male relationships:

I feel like sex between two women really doesn't even have the limits that you would have between two men because... two women can still use a dildo and have vaginal intercourse the same way [as] a heterosexual couple.

This may suggest that lesbian sex is advantageous in its ability to more closely mimic heterosexual sex. However, Sarah views the dildo as the necessary and sufficient apparatus in which to achieve this similarity. In ways very similar to that of definitions of lesbian sex, the presence or absence of the penis and its corresponding ability to penetrate was considered. This was articulated by a number of participants:

Kelly: When you're having lesbian sex, there's no penis involved, so there's not as much of an element of penetration unless you have toys involved. So it's more about just like stimulating different parts of the body instead of just like fucking.

Researcher: Do you think that lesbian sex can be as pleasurable as heterosexual sex?

Marie: I think it... I feel it could be. Just cause if they use like something, like toys and stuff like that to make it more similar. I feel like again, it's probably frustrating, but I feel like it would be a little easier.

Researcher: So with the use of something like a vibrator, why do you think it would make it easier?

Marie: Because they could simulate like a male being there I guess.

For these participants, the penis (or, in Marie's case, the presence of a male who wields a penis) is important to their conceptions of how sexual activity would take place between two women. For Marie, the absence of a male led her to consider that perhaps lesbians would feel they were missing out on something:

Researcher: So you had mentioned there would still be this level of frustration possibly within lesbian sex. Frustration stemming from what?

Marie: Just I guess knowing that they can't have it normally, or in a normal way... I guess just, yeah, just [they would] be curious about like,

“Are we still getting that same satisfaction?” that the male, like they would have if there was a male there.

It is important to note that these participants did not believe that the absence of the penis detracted from the possibility for lesbians to experience sexual pleasure. However, the equation of intercourse with the penis and the understanding of the penis as being the dominant body part with which to penetrate a woman was of significance to understanding how individuals viewed and understood lesbian sex.

DISCUSSION

This research was focused on how a small sample of college-aged individuals conceived of the sexual practices of gays and lesbians, and how they perceived the pleurability of gay and lesbian sexual activity. The use of a heterosexual, male-dominant model in order to orient and understand sexual relationships was prevalent throughout participant interviews. This model directed the types and kinds of sexual messages that individuals in this sample had received, and was influential in forming participant conceptions of non-heterosexual sexual relationships. At the institutional level, participants recounted the receiving of gendered messages in which the male was the dominant figure in sexual relationships, while women were more submissive (or even less sexual in nature).

Participants also mentioned the promotion of the double-standard as the norm when describing what they had learned about sex growing up. However, in much the same way that participants described school- and family-based messages about sex, these gendered distinctions were often mentioned as having less of an effect on their own sexual relationships or thoughts about the roles of men and women within these relationships as they grew older and/or their relationships progressed in length and commitment. In this way, the formation of an interpersonal sexual script was open to modification and change

as individuals encountered new relationships, experiences and modes of thought which may have deviated from more prominent cultural messages.

In a similar vein, participants in this study also described the family- and school-based messages regarding sex to be too rigid, focused largely on biology and consequences while censoring more helpful information. Indeed, the definitions of sex which were offered by participants were described as more encompassing or different from their understanding of a cultural definition. This points to a partial rejection of school and family conceptions, or at least the view that these two institutions were leaving out other important aspects of sexual relationships, such as emotions and sexual acts other than intercourse. The feeling that schools and families were not offering the most accurate or most helpful bits about sex often led participants to seek information from media and other peers. Media and peers as go-to sources for sex information is nothing new; however, the importance of media and peers in driving greater exposure to homosexual subject matter is important for understanding how such exposure may inform ideas about homosexuality and the forging of non-heterosexual sexual relationships. Some participants did offer that what they understood of gays and lesbians was influenced by media or peers. Overall, both macro- and micro-level sources accounted for the individual learning process with regards to sex, with individual ideas about what sex is and how sexual relationships should play out changing with experience and exposure. The “it’s more than just penis in vagina” understanding of sex may be understood as lending itself to the inclusion of homosexual relationships within individuals’ sexual schemas. However, such a schema was found to still be oriented by the male-identified presence in sexual relationships, such that the “penis in *something*,” patriarchal model

may be understood as more influential to making sense of sexual relationships than the “penis in vagina,” heteronormative model.

The findings of this study suggest that conceptions of sex are less oriented by sexual orientation than by gender and its assumed correlation to physiology. Stated another way, sexual schemas may be less informed by sexual orientation, at least among this sample, than by a male-female dichotomy and the equation of the penis with men and the vagina with women. Relatedly, the understanding of the male as the dominant gender in American culture translates into a conception of sex in which the male body and its penetrative capabilities inform understandings about what sex is and which sexual behaviors are best. This became evident during participant discussions of gay and lesbian sex, as these two types of sexual relationships pitted the presence of two penises against the presence of none.

Participants defined gay sex in very similar ways as they had defined sex in general, with the sex and/or gender of the participants serving as the most prominent difference and with anal sex serving as a substitute for penile-vaginal sex. The substitution of sexual acts identified the male penetrative moment as the criteria for defining an act as sex. This was made even more evident when participants were asked to define lesbian sex. The conflation of gender with physiological capabilities was apparent when individuals separated lesbian sexual *behaviors* such as oral sex or fingering from definitions of lesbian *sex*, the latter of which was conceived of on the basis of a phallic representative penetrating. The almost unanimous mentioning of strap-ons, dildos or similar sex toys when describing lesbian sex suggests the importance of the presence of

an object which is comparable to the authentic male phallus in conceiving of sexual relationships in which one is not physically available.

A greater emphasis on the sex and/or gender(s) of individuals involved in a sexual act was also evident when considering sexual pleasure. Participants' definitions of sex and considerations of sexual pleasure with regards to heterosexual relationships lacked strong gender emphases. However, when considering the sexual behaviors of gay men and lesbians specifically, participants focused on the physiological capabilities of the individuals involved, though they tended to express these in gendered terms. Such a finding is significant in its suggestion of the formation of sexual schemas which are informed predominantly by gender. This was particularly evident in participant focus on the presence or absence of a penis when considering non-heterosexual sexual relationships and conceptions of sex within those relationships. Understood as an organ with penetrative properties, the penis and its association with the male sex challenged constructions of lesbian sex and sexual behavior on the basis of the fact that the penis is not a given in those relationships.

All participants agreed that gay and lesbian sex could be just as pleasurable as heterosexual sex, but their remarks about adding a penis to lesbian sex suggests their understanding that pleasure can only be heightened from the presence of one. Such a suggestion illustrates how the male body and male pleasure continues to be privileged in conceptions of sex, and raises questions of what consequences this has for understanding female pleasure. Despite the finding that lesbian women preferred the fingers and tongues of their partners to the use of a dildo to achieve orgasm (Coleman, Hoon and Hoon, 1983), the privileging of the male experience in sexual relationships serves to inform

ideas about how lesbian sexual relationships are to be made more pleasurable. Resultantly, stimulation of the clitoris as a central site of female pleasure becomes secondary (or even overlooked) to the male-identified sexual act which is believed to elicit the most pleasure. Indeed, mention of the clitoris was almost non-existent during participant interviews, and is telling of the influence of patriarchy on both male and female conceptions of sexual pleasure.

Another indicator of a male-centered conception of sex and sexual pleasure was the fact that the presence of a penis in a sexual relationship was taken for granted until the sexes of the individuals involved suggested that one was not there. This was evident during participant discussions of what they believed made a sexual encounter pleasurable, as they emphasized emotional connection, trust and/or communication between partners as important to contributing to a pleasurable sexual experience. However, when the presence of a penis could no longer be assumed during participant consideration of the pleasure of lesbian sex, ideas about pleasure became drawn from adding a penis to the equation first. As one participant stated when asked about the pleasurability of lesbian sex, “I almost feel like I wanna put in a strap-on dildo.” Such remarks about wanting to add to the scenario were non-existent in considerations of gay sexual pleasure. Rather, several participants mentioned the ability for the male penis to penetrate and reach the prostate of another male as one reason for why they believed that gay sex could be as pleasurable as heterosexual sex. As one male explained, “because the male g-spot is in the anus... I would definitely say you could get the same amount of pleasure [as in heterosexual sexual relationships].” In this way, the gay male scenario in which a penis is present, is able to penetrate and is capable of stimulating a highly sensitive part of

another male's anatomy informed understandings of sexual pleasure. For lesbians, however, a sufficient substitute similar in size and shape to that of the male penis was often discussed/added/stated as a condition of the sexual act between two women before the pleasure of an act between two women could be considered.

In sum, the conceptions of gay and lesbian sex and sexual pleasure made by the individuals in this study point to an orienting of sexual relationships and an understanding of the potential for those sexual relationships to be pleasurable based on a male-focused, "penis in something" model. The participants in this study believed that gay and lesbian sex were both legitimate types of sex and that both types of sexual relationships were of the ability to be pleasurable and fulfilling. These beliefs were often explained in terms of an understanding that an individual's desires and attractions inform their ideas about what will or will not be pleasurable. However, the presence or absence of a penis was central to imagining and understanding these relationships.

CONCLUSION

Participant reactions to gay and lesbian sex, as well as to gays and lesbians in general, present evidence of a generational shift in attitudes and understandings of sexual minorities. More specifically, when asked for their thoughts on gay and lesbian sex, participants often responded in a manner which suggested that relationships were for the fulfillment of those engaged in them, regardless of whether or not those relationships coincided with society's or other individuals' moral standings on the subject. Even for those who stated that they did not necessarily agree with homosexual sex or relationships, reactions were relatively positive. This was consistent with participant indication that some institutions were more helpful in their discussion or portrayal of sex than others,

regardless of whether or not homosexual subject matter was breached. More specifically, family members and the schooling system were often described as tight-lipped and elusive in their discussion of explicit sexual topics, as opposed to the media's unabashed, albeit glamorized, depictions.

What this sample of young adults have described is crucial to better understanding the formation of sexual schemas among this generation, particularly in the recognition of understandings of sex and sexual pleasure which are informed first and foremost by the presence or absence of a penis, and secondly by the sexual orientation of the individuals involved. Such an understanding provides a framework from which to make important interventions with regards to the discussion of sex and sexual messages. Chief among these is the continued examination of heterosexual conceptualization of gay and lesbian sexual behavior. Though today's college undergraduates may convey a more accepting view of homosexual sexual behavior, comparing such views to other samples or populations and what these views mean for actual treatment of sexual minorities is not yet possible, given the dearth of information on this topic as it relates to other demographics. This includes older generations, individuals across social class divisions, racial and ethnic minorities and individuals of varying degrees of ability, to name just a few. A continued examination of conceptualization of gay and lesbian sexual behavior with a growing sophistication in methods and attention paid to the role of intersectionality can only serve to further this field.

Additionally, the responsibility of major social institutions to the education of youth on sexual subject matter is less a point of contention than *what* is taught to our youth. Participant discussion of the ways in which schools and families simplified,

avoided or silenced certain topics related to sex should be of concern, as should their recounting of the ways in which media may be more candid, yet misleading, in their portrayals. As gays and lesbians become more visible in the mainstream, social institutions must adjust and confront the realities of non-heterosexual partnerships. The fight for equal rights for gays and lesbians continues; however, the silencing of gay and lesbian subject matter, especially as it pertains to the formation of sexual relationships, also continues. In a society in which heterosexual sexual relationships are legitimated at the expense of others, the implications for a misunderstanding of minority sexual lifestyles can be devastating. The continued association of HIV and AIDS with the gay male population and fears among servicemembers of what a repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” would mean for military life are just two examples of how perceptions about non-heterosexual sexual relationships can stigmatize, scapegoat and marginalize a population. In the envisioning of a society in which open and honest discussion and accurate portrayals of sexual minorities are prioritized, the role that social institutions must play in contributing to these discussions and portrayals is paramount.

Additionally, reflecting back on participant conceptions of gay and lesbian sex, the presence of a male-dominated model of what constitutes sex and sexual pleasure must be confronted. The construction, higher valuation and privileging of masculinity in a patriarchal America not only impacts male-female interaction in heterosexual relationships, but serves to influence how sexual minorities are viewed and/or treated. The imagery of the gay male as flamboyant faggot effectively serves to distance heterosexual males from a population which is genetically male yet perceived as effeminate. This results in the privileging and protection of heterosexual masculinity. In

an opposite manner, the understanding of lesbianism as “just a phase,” and the viewing of sexual relationships between women as there for the entertainment of male heterosexuals not only reinforces male heterosexual privilege, but delegitimizes lesbianism as an authentic way of being, feeling and connecting. Continued study of the conceptions of gay and lesbian sexual relationships is essential to better understanding what influences these conceptions, and how such an understanding of non-heterosexual sexual relationships contributes to prejudice and discrimination of sexual minorities. Realization of sexual minority rights and greater acceptance of these populations lies not only in educating the masses, but in inviting the masses to educate us as scholars, advocates, allies and concerned citizens, so that we may better understand the current state of sexual minority prejudice in America. Involving everyone in the movement for social justice, however small their part, can only serve to make for more successful intervention and enable us to navigate less resistant paths to acceptance.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

The following represents the main lines of questioning for the interviews to be conducted for this study. Secondary and/or probe questions are included in parentheses.

1. How would you define sex?
2. When did you first learn about sex? (What did you learn?)

Researcher: I am now going to ask you about your previous sexual experiences. Do you feel comfortable with continuing the interview?

3. Would you say that what you have learned about sex has influenced or does influence your sexual experiences? (In what ways? Does what you have learned about sex play any role in what do you do sexually, in what order, where, with whom, under what conditions, etc?)

4. What is the extent of your sexual experience? (Have you ever had sexual intercourse? If not, then what would you classify as the “furthest” you have ever gone sexually?)

5. Do you think that your gender influences your sexual experiences? How? (Do you think that gender plays a role in what your partner does sexually? Some people say they like to play around with gender when having sex. Some people do not like to play with gender during sex. Some people do not think about it at all. Have you ever “played around” with gender roles during sex? Why or why not?)

6. How do you define pleasurability? (How would you define sexual pleasurability?)

7. In your opinion, what makes a sexual encounter pleasurable? (What should a man do to make sex pleasurable? What should a woman do to make sex pleasurable?)

Researcher: How are you feeling thus far? Is it alright for us to continue the interview? Next, I would like to ask you about different types of sexuality.

8. What sexual behaviors do you believe two men typically engage in? Do you think there is a particular order in which they engage in these sexual behaviors?

9. What sexual behaviors do you believe two women typically engage in? Do you think there is a particular order in which they engage in these sexual behaviors?

Appendix A cont.

10. How would you define gay sex? (What sexual behaviors do you believe gay men typically engage in? Do you think there is a particular order in which they engage in these sexual behaviors?)

11. How would you define lesbian sex? (What sexual behaviors do you believe lesbians typically engage in? Do you think there is a particular order in which they engage in these sexual behaviors?)

12. Would you say that gay sex and lesbian sex are similar to each other? Different from each other? Both? In what ways?

13. Do you think that gay sex can be as pleasurable as heterosexual sex? Why or why not?

14. Do you think that lesbian sex can be as pleasurable as heterosexual sex? Why or why not?

15. Do you think there are similarities or differences in the ways that heterosexuals define pleurability, versus how gay men define pleurability? In what ways? (What about how lesbians define pleurability?)

16. What do you think about gay sex? (What do you think about lesbian sex?)

Researcher: I am interested in how you understand sexuality. Do you have any additional thoughts on this topic?

Appendix B

Pre-screening Interview

Thank you for your interest in this study. As noted in the advertisement, I am conducting interviews with current undergraduates on matters of sexuality. In order to assess your eligibility for this study, I need to ask you a few questions. This should take no more than five minutes of your time. Your answers are confidential, and do not obligate you to the study in any way. If eligible for the interview, I will arrange a time for you to be interviewed; however, you are free to opt out of the interview at any time.

1. Are you currently an undergraduate?
2. What year are you in at this university (first-year, second-year, etc.)?
3. What is your age?
4. What is your sexual orientation?

For eligible participants: Thank you for your responses and your interest in this study. I would like to arrange a time to conduct an interview with you. Please be aware that the time commitment for this interview may range anywhere from thirty minutes to one and a half hours. The interviews will be conducted on the fourth floor of the University Center. Limitations on accessibility to the facilities at the University Center require that the interview take place between 8:30am & 7pm, Monday-Friday. Please let me know two or three time slots that are most convenient for you to meet for the interview.

For ineligible participants (ineligibility due to status as a first-year student): Thank you for your responses and your interest in this study. This study seeks to better understand how self-identified heterosexuals conceive of the sexual practices of non-heterosexuals. Unfortunately, you are ineligible to participate in this study given your status as a first-year student. Please be assured that your responses to this questionnaire will be kept confidential. Feel free to contact me with any further questions you may have regarding this study or the prescreening process.

Appendix C

Pre-Interview Discussion

Before I begin the interview, I would like to take a few moments to discuss what to expect during the interview, as well as address any concerns you may have regarding the interview process.

As you may know by now, this study is interested in how college undergraduates understand same-sex sexual activity. During the interview, you will be asked questions about sexuality and gender. Some of these questions ask directly about your own personal experiences. Before we get started with the interview, please be aware of the following:

- This interview will address potentially sensitive topics related to gender, sexuality and sexual behavior. Some of these questions may be embarrassing or uncomfortable to answer. Please be advised that you do not have to answer any question that you do not want to.
- You are free to ask for a break at any time.
- You may ask for clarification of a question or term at any time.
- You are free to stop the interview at any time.

Please note that you may withdraw from the interview at any time without consequence. Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin?

Appendix D

Post-Interview Discussion

Once again, your participation in this study is greatly appreciated. Thank you for taking time out of your day to meet with me. At this point, do you have any questions regarding the study or your participation in it?

I have provided you with a debriefing form that I hope should answer any questions you may have after you leave here today. Participating in a study that asks questions about sexuality, sexual behavior and gender may highlight emotional, behavioral, or relationship problems that you might want to discuss with a professional. Due to the sensitive nature of some of the questions asked here today, I want to let you know that I will be contacting you again in about a week to address any possible concerns or questions you may have related to your interview and/or your involvement in this study. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you would like to speak with me before the follow-up call.

Appendix E

Post-Interview Follow-Up

I am contacting you to follow-up on our interview from last week. I realize that the topics which were discussed may be potentially upsetting for some. The purpose of this e-mail is to inquire as to whether or not you are experiencing distress that may be related to the interview.

If you do not feel comfortable discussing this with me, I urge you to consult the sources listed on the debriefing form. If you would like me to send you another copy of the debriefing form, please let me know.

With this being said, if have any further questions or concerns that you would like to address at this time, feel free to contact me via e-mail or phone.

Thank you again for your participation in this study.

Best,

Janelle Pham

Teaching Assistant, Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Lehigh University

Appendix F

Consent Form
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Lehigh University

Sexual Scripts and Heterosexual College Students' Conceptions of Same-Sex Sexual Activity and Related Pleasurability

I, Janelle Pham, am conducting this research for my master's thesis in Sociology under the direction of my advisor, Dr. Tanya Saunders. The aim of this study is to learn about sexuality on a college campus. As such, you will be asked sensitive questions about sex, sexuality and gender. In particular, I am interested in your understanding of what constitutes a sexual act, and how you conceive of the sexual practices of others. You will also be asked questions pertaining to your previous sexual experiences, as well as questions regarding your thoughts on gay and lesbian sexual activity.

I would like to conduct an anonymous interview with you about these topics. This interview will be audio recorded and will last approximately 1-1.5 hours.

Your participation in this research project is strictly voluntary. You will receive no direct benefits from participating. In order to protect your identity, I will not be using your name in my research report. In order to further protect your identity, do not state your name during the interview.

Participation in research may cause a loss of privacy. In this study, you will be asked about previous sexual experiences. Should I become aware of any illegal activities during the course of this interview (e.g., child abuse, drug and alcohol abuse by minors), in my position as a researcher I may be ethically obligated to report such activities. Should this need to report arise, you will be informed of my intent to do so.

As previously mentioned, the interview will be audio recorded. I may also take additional notes about any questions I may have regarding your responses. The audio tapes and any notes will be stored in a locked filing cabinet until the research is completed. After the research is completed, the audio tapes and notes will be destroyed. You do not have to answer any question you do not want to, and you may stop the interview or ask questions at any time without jeopardizing your relationship with Lehigh University.

By signing below, you agree that:

I can audio record this interview.

You understand that your participation in this research is strictly voluntary.

Appendix F cont.

You understand that you may ask me to stop the interview at any time. You may ask me questions at any time, and you do not have to answer any question you do not wish to answer.

You understand that your identity will be kept confidential.

Any questions regarding this research may be directed to Janelle Pham at (717) 329-8435 or jap309@lehigh.edu. The advisor for this study, Dr. Tanya Saunders, may be contacted at (610) 758-3819 or tas207@lehigh.edu. You may report problems that may result from your participation or direct questions in regard to your rights as a subject in this study to Ruth Tallman, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, Lehigh University, (610) 758-3021 or inors@lehigh.edu. All reports or correspondence will be kept confidential.

To confirm that you have read and understand the foregoing information, that you have received answers to any questions you asked, and to consent to participate in the study, please sign below.

Signature

Date

Appendix G



Office of Research and
Sponsored Programs
526 Brodhead Avenue
Bethlehem, PA 18015-3046
(610) 758-3021 Fax (610) 758-5994
<http://www.lehigh.edu/~inors>

DATE: September 10, 2010

TO: Janelle Pheam
FROM: Leah Robinson, IRB

STUDY TITLE: ~~CONCEPTIONS OF SAME-SEX SEXUAL ACTIVITY AND RELATED PLEASURABILITY~~
conceptions of same-sex sexual activity and related pleasurability

IRB REFERENCE #: 10/210 R
SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification
ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: September 7, 2010
PROJECT EXPIRATION DATE: September 6, 2011
INITIAL APPROVAL DATE: September 7, 2010
REVIEW TYPE: Full Committee Review

Thank you for your submission of materials for this research study. The Lehigh University IRB has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a study design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with the approved submission. This approval is valid for one year.

This submission has received Full Committee Review based on the Lehigh University Policy on the Protection of Human Subjects in Research.

Reapproval and Progress Report: The current approval will expire on September 6, 2011. If you wish to continue beyond that time, you must submit a renewal request and progress report on the Continuing Review form via IRBNet. This protocol will be due for continuing IRB review 60 days before the expiration date of September 6, 2011.

Informed Consent: Please remember that INFORMED CONSENT is a process beginning with a description of the study and insurance of subject understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the study via a dialogue between the researcher and the research subject. The Lehigh University policy requires each subject receive a copy of the signed consent document.

Changes or Amendments: If during the year you propose significant changes in your approved protocol, please submit these changes for review using the amendment/modification form through IRBNet. The proposed changes may not be initiated without IRB approval (except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazards to subjects).

Adverse Events: All SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported to this office. Please use the appropriate adverse event forms through IRBNet for this procedure. All sponsor reporting requirements should also be followed. Any injuries or other unanticipated problems involving risks to research subjects and others resulting from this study must be reported promptly to the Lehigh University IRB. If the problem is serious, approval may be withdrawn pending further review by the committee.

Non-compliance or Complaints: Please report all NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this study to this office.



Appendix G cont.

Completion of Study and Record Retention: Please notify the Lehigh University IRB as soon as the research has been completed. Study records, including full protocols and signed consent forms (originals) for each subject, must be kept in a secured location by the investigator for 3 years following the study's completion.

If you have any questions, please contact Ruth Tallman at 610-756-3024 or rt01@lehigh.edu. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

Appendix H

Sample Information

Name	Gender	Age	College Year	Major	Sexual Orientation	Relationship Status	Religion and/or school type attended
Abigail	Female	21	Senior	Biology	Heterosexual	Single	Public school
Alexandra	Female	20	Junior	Mechanical Engineering and Social Sciences	Heterosexual	In a relationship	Jewish, attended Hebrew school
Anthony	Male	19	Sophomore	Management	Heterosexual	Single	Unknown
Beverly	Female	21	Junior	Asian Studies and Graphic Design	Heterosexual	In a relationship	Raised Catholic
Brent	Male	20	Junior	Bioengineering	Heterosexual	In a relationship	Unknown
Carol	Female	20	Junior	Unknown	Heterosexual	In a relationship	Attended Catholic school
Daniel	Male	19	Sophomore	Mathematics	Heterosexual	Single	Unknown
Daria	Female	22	Fifth-Year	Philosophy	Does not identify	In a relationship	Attended Catholic school

Appendix H cont.

Sample Information

Name	Gender	Age	College Year	Major	Sexual Orientation	Relationship Status	Religion and/or school type attended
Grace	Female	21	Junior	English	Does not identify	In a relationship with a woman	Attended Catholic school
James	Male	21	Senior	Pre-Medicine	Heterosexual	Single	Unknown
Kelly	Female	20	Junior	Computer Science	Bisexual	Single	Unknown
Marie	Female	22	Senior	Psychology	Heterosexual	Single	Attended Catholic school
Megan	Female	19	Sophomore	Global Studies	Heterosexual	In a relationship	Raised Catholic, Attended CCD
Sarah	Female	22	Fifth-Year	Physics	Heterosexual	Single	Unknown

Janelle M. Pham

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EDUCATION

Master of Arts Lehigh University, Bethlehem Pennsylvania 2011
Sociology

Bachelor of Arts Moravian College, Bethlehem Pennsylvania 2007
History (summa cum laude)

RESEARCH INTERESTS

Human Sexuality and Sexology, Queer Theory, Social Stratification and
Inequality, Sociology of Sport and Military Sociology

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

“The Other’s bedroom: College student conceptions of gay and lesbian sex and
pleasurability” (MA Thesis)

“The Sexual Revolution in 1960s Bethlehem, Pennsylvania” (Moravian College
Senior Project)

“Sexual Imperialism: The role of sexual exploitation in the Japanese capture of
Nanjing, China” (Moravian College Senior Project)

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Lehigh University (Teaching Assistant)

Research Methods and Data Analysis (Fall 2010)

Introduction to Sociology and Social Psychology (Fall 2009, Spring 2010,
Spring 2011)

Northampton Community College (Adjunct Lecturer)

Principles of Sociology (Summer 2010)

HONORS AND AWARDS

Lehigh University College of Arts and Sciences Summer Research Fellowship, 2010
Teaching Assistantship, Lehigh University, 2009-2011
Certificate, Lehigh University Teacher Development Program, 2009
The E.C. Schultz History Prize, Moravian College, 2008
Best Undergraduate History Paper, Moravian College, 2006 & 2007
Phi Alpha Theta Honor Society, 2006
Omicron Delta Kappa Honor Society, 2006
Runner-up, Omicron Delta Kappa Rising Star Award for Outstanding Sophomore Leader, Moravian College, 2005
Phi Eta Sigma Honor Society, 2004

SCHOLARLY PRESENTATIONS

Heterosexual Attitudes toward Homosexuals: A Literature Review
Eastern Sociological Society Annual Meeting, Boston, MA, March 18-21, 2010

Sexual Scripts and Heterosexual College Students' Conceptions of Same-sex Sexual Activity and Pleasurability **Eastern Sociological Society Annual Meeting**, Philadelphia, PA, February 24-27, 2011

ACADEMIC SERVICE

Lehigh University College of Arts and Sciences Dean's Advisory Council, 2009-2011
President, Phi Eta Sigma Honor Society, Moravian College Chapter, 2004

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

Eastern Sociological Society (Member)
Society for the Study of Social Problems (Member)
Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction (Member)