

# **Debunking the Myth of Gay Promiscuity**

By Theo Lyons

**ABSTRACT.** The stereotype of gay men as a promiscuous, immoral group has its origins in the way in which the concept of homosexuality has been (and continues to be) discursively constructed in Western society. Contemporary understandings of male homosexuality have been shaped by discourses which focus on the act and gendered roles of sodomy, and as a result of this our society continues to associate gay men not with their interest in loving and living with other men, but simply with their engagement in the act of gay sex. Discussions of male homosexuality have examined the behavior of small groups of men who have been made visible by their promiscuity, and this has bolstered the harmful perception of gay men as naturally promiscuous. This myth of gay promiscuity clearly limits the lives of gay men, and continues to be perpetrated in complex and detrimental ways.

When I came out to my dad, one of the first things he told me was that he was “upset that I had chosen a lifestyle characterized by short and unstable relationships.” While I was troubled by numerous aspects of this remark, and found it to be generally reflective of a total lack of understanding of homosexuality, I was particularly confused by the suggestion that my sexual orientation would somehow prevent me from forming viable and committed long-term relationships. I have since come to understand my father’s comment as an expression of what I will refer to as the myth of gay promiscuity. This paper will argue that the common perception that gay men are an

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unusually promiscuous group has its origins in the way in which the concept of homosexuality has been discursively constructed in western society. Beyond that, it will examine why some gay men actually do play out this stereotype of promiscuity, why those men are more visible than the rest of the community, and finally, how this assumption of promiscuity has affected and continues to affect the lives of all homosexual men.

Nikki Sullivan has written that “sexuality is not natural, but rather, is discursively constructed” and that it is “experienced, and understood in culturally and historically specific ways.”<sup>1</sup> Further, she claims that “an analysis of the discourses surrounding and informing sexuality can provide clues as to why particular knowledges, practices, and subjectivities emerge.”<sup>2</sup> So in considering the discourses that have created our society’s understanding of male homosexuality, perhaps it is possible to find clues as to why and how homosexuality has come to be so closely associated with promiscuous sexual practices.

When discussing the invention of homosexuality, Annamarie Jagose describes Michel Foucault’s claim that whereas homosexual acts had previously been seen as sins to which anyone might be susceptible, “around 1870, and in various medical discourses, the notion of the homosexual as an identifiable type of person begins to emerge. No longer simply someone who participates in certain sexual acts, the homosexual begins to be defined fundamentally in terms of those very acts.”<sup>3</sup> This quotation reveals the degree to which early studies of homosexuality (which are almost exclusively concerned with male

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1 Sullivan, 1

2 Ibid.

3 Jagose, 11

homosexuality) tend to focus upon the act of gay sex itself.

Because our understanding of male homosexuality, as formed by disparate legal, psychological, and medical discourses, has come out of the study of the act of sodomy itself, our society has come to associate gay men not with their interest in loving and living with other men, but simply with their engagement in the act of gay sex.<sup>4</sup> What happens in the bedroom is what sets homosexual relationships apart from heterosexual ones, and has traditionally been what justifies the legal, social, and religious ostracism of gay men. Sex has come to define and legitimate gay men, and as a result of this, it is easy to portray and understand the gay community as overly sexual.

While this analysis partially explains the early association of homosexuality with “moral deviation and sexual excess”<sup>5</sup> in order to fully understand the development of the psychological link between male homosexuality and promiscuity one must delve deeper. One factor that influenced the emergence of the perception of gay men as promiscuous is the fact that during the period in which the modern concept of homosexuality was first developing, the only visible members of the gay community were those who actually were promiscuous.

Rupert Trumbach discusses this idea in the context of English society. At various times men who had sex with men were understood through the

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4 This paper focuses its discussion on the act of sodomy because this act has been historically and discursively linked to “gay” sex. It is important to note, though, that sodomy is neither an exclusively homosexual practice, nor a definitive or essential aspect of “gay” sexuality. To suggest this would be to obscure the diversity of sexual practices and preferences that exist within the gay community.

5 Kleese, 58

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different personas of rakes, fops, and mollies. Although rakes and fops were both understood to occasionally engage in sex with younger boys, this did not necessarily compromise their masculinity, as their promiscuity was in of itself a testimony to their masculine virility. These men always took the dominant, masculine role of penetrator, and they were presumed to be primarily interested in women. With the emergence of the molly, “the exclusive adult sodomite”<sup>6</sup> who took both active and passive roles in gay sex, men who had sex with men could no longer be seen as masculine. As a result of this, men who had sex with men (now labeled ‘mollies’) found that they could only pursue the relations they desired “in a subculture of the like-minded.”<sup>7</sup> This resulted in the emergence of molly houses and taverns, in which sexual encounters could safely take place. These new forums came to be populated by what was in all likelihood a small and sexually active minority of the total population of men whose primary sexual attraction was to other men. Despite this, because the frequenters of molly houses and taverns were the subjects of virtually all early discussion and prosecution of homosexuality, they contributed disproportionately to the development of Western society’s understanding of gay male sexuality. Equivalent forums for women who had sex with women did not exist during this period.

An example of the way in which this kind of misrepresentation has shaped contemporary public perceptions of homosexuality can be found in early responses to the AIDS crisis. In *Gay Macho: The Life and Death of the Homosexual Clone*, Martin Levine discusses how essentialist constructions of homosexuality

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6 Trumbach, 134

7 Trumbach, 136

appeared in the designation of gay men as a high-risk population. Epidemiologists studying AIDS based this classification on the fact that the vast majority of early AIDS cases were promiscuous gay men who consumed recreational drugs. The decision to categorize all gay men as part of a high-risk population reflects the doctor's "essentialist perceptions about the behavioral patterns of gay men. [They] assumed that most gay men were at risk for the disease because they were commonly hyperpromiscuous drug users."<sup>8</sup> Levine goes on to observe that "essentialism blinded these researchers to the diversity of behavioral patterns within the gay community. Gay men vary widely in their sexual and drug habits, and [research has shown that] only a small minority of gay men were promiscuous and took drugs."<sup>9</sup> Levine's discussion demonstrates the extent to which discourses on male homosexuality have been continually informed through an analysis of groups of gay men who have been made visible by their promiscuity, and have consistently used these observations to retroactively form conclusions about the essential nature of gay sexuality.

Beyond the question of visibility and the overrepresentation of particular groups, one might gain insight into why some gay men actually are promiscuous by returning to the way in which homosexual identity has been constructed. Looking once more at Jagose, Sullivan, and Trumbach's varying accounts of the construction of a uniquely homosexual identity, one clear commonality between their narratives is the crucial role that masculine / feminine gender roles played in the construction process. Men were deemed perverse and oppressed in so much as

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8 Levine, 240

9 Ibid., 240

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they engaged in sexual behavior that did not conform to what society saw to be a masculine gender role.

West and Zimmerman argue that “‘the doing’ of gender is undertaken by women and men whose competence as members of society is hostage to its production [and that] doing gender involves a complex of ... activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures.’”<sup>10</sup> In this sense, in order to maintain, and “bolster [their] claims to membership in a sex category”<sup>11</sup> men were expected to take a dominant, penetrative role in sexual relations. The mollies discussed by Trumbach were unable to pass this test of masculinity and were accordingly deemed ‘effeminate,’ and ostracized from mainstream society. Likewise, when Sullivan describes how buggery laws criminalized sodomy, how Ulrichs saw gay men as being victims of a hermaphroditism of the soul, and how Kraft-Ebbing understood male ‘inverts’ as being degenerate, she is similarly telling the story of how men who are attracted to men have been ostracized for their failure to successfully perform masculine gender through sex. From all this it would seem that if only gay men could find a means of reclaiming the masculinity of their sexuality, they could free themselves from the hatred of heterosexual society.

Perhaps for some gay men promiscuity can, at least on an unconscious level, function as means of salvaging their masculinity. Levine argues that “masculinity is enacted in sexual scripts by the emphasis on scoring, by...the ability to have sex without love..., and by the pursuit of sexual gratification for its own sake” and that “the male sexual script makes it

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10 West and Zimmerman, 126

11 *Ibid.*, 126

normative to take risks, to engage in anonymous sex, and to have difficulty sustaining emotional intimacy, and it validates promiscuous sexual behavior.”<sup>12</sup> These behavioral patterns need not be essential characteristics of the male sex for them to be accepted as part of what helps men to perform masculine gender. If this is so, then promiscuity would be a means by which groups of gay men might seek to reaffirm the masculinity of their sexuality. Despite that, it would seem ironic that behavioral patterns adopted as a means of reaffirming the masculinity of gay men, have been so persistently used as a means of justifying and furthering society’s vilification of homosexuality.

There are other factors that help to explain the emergence of promiscuity in some gay communities. Until relatively recently, men who were sexually attracted to other men were unable to act upon any aspect of their sexuality beyond having the occasional sexual encounter. Because participation in stable homosexual relationships would have been highly dangerous, and would have almost certainly resulted in exclusion from jobs, housing, and social networks, gay men were sometimes left with a choice between celibacy and anonymous, non-committal sex. Furthermore, sexually active gay men were categorically denied access to the social institutions that at least supposedly limit promiscuity and promote monogamy among heterosexual men—namely marriage, child-raising, and religion. Despite that, it is important to note that these behavioral patterns were by no means ever characteristic of all gay men, and that they were in fact only ever specific to certain, highly visible groups within the gay male population.

Having thus discussed several different factors that may have contributed to the origins and spread of the myth of gay promiscuity, I will now examine a few of the ways in which this myth has affected gay men. Gay men's supposed promiscuity has long been used to enforce claims that gay men are by nature immoral, and plays a key role in justifying heterosexual privilege. It has been used to defend accusations that gay men brought the AIDS crisis upon themselves and is regularly perpetuated through the mass-media's depictions of homosexuality. Furthermore, the myth of gay promiscuity has had a clear impact upon the legal marginalization of gay men. One example of this can be found in UK immigration law, which sets much higher standards for the naturalization of gay men's overseas partners than for heterosexual couples. In *Immigration Controls, The Family, and The Welfare State*, Steve Cohen describes how gay couples are required to demonstrate at least two years of uninterrupted cohabitation (whereas there are no such requirements for married heterosexual couples) and how "the requirement [for gay men seeking the naturalization of an overseas partner] to show the breakdown of all previous relationships is judgmental, [and] seems aimed against a caricatured image of gay men as promiscuous."<sup>13</sup>

Beyond its use as a means of stigmatizing gay men and justifying their inequality under the law, the myth of gay male promiscuity has also emerged in the politics of the Queer movement where it has been cited by notable lesbian feminists as an example of the immorality of gay men. While arguing against the utility of a united queer movement, Lynne Harne depicts gay

men as sex-crazed hedonists, who seek to use to queer politics to broaden their sexual prospects by lowering “the age of consent law for gay men to that of heterosexuals.”<sup>14</sup> She also makes much of “gay men's resistance to feminist challenges to change their sexual behavior,”<sup>15</sup> and describes how “gay men in local groups... would use 'befriending' (a process where a new member was introduced into a gay group) as a means to sexually exploit the new member into having sex with him.”<sup>16</sup> In *Compulsory Heterosexuality*, while discussing the undesirability of an alliance between gay men and lesbian women, Adrienne Rich also points to the “qualitative differences in female and male relationships, [such as] the prevalence of anonymous sex and the justification of pederasty among male homosexuals [and] the pronounced ageism in male homosexual standards of sexual attractiveness.”<sup>17</sup> Here Rich depicts gay men as not merely promiscuous, but also shallow and inclined to pedophilia.

The myth of gay male promiscuity, which was reflected in my dad's disappointment about my sexual orientation, thus manifests itself in a variety of ways, and continues to subtly, yet surely, work against the interests of gay men. It has become a part of how society understands gay men both because of the way in which the modern concept of homosexuality was constructed around the act of sex, and because of the overrepresentation of certain groups of gay men, who for a variety of reasons, choose to engage in promiscuous behavior. We can only truly begin to debunk this myth once we have sought to examine

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14 Harne, 17

15 *Ibid.*, 15-16

16 *Ibid.*, 16

17 Rich, 649-650

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where it comes from, who espouses it, and how it limits the lives of the men it seeks to describe.

**Theo Lyons** is a second year student, pursuing a degree in political science and European history. He is particularly interested in political philosophy, as well as emerging fields such as international humanitarian law. Theo chose to write on the myth of gay promiscuity because it's an issue that is personally relevant to all gay men, and one, which deserves more scholarly attention.

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