

BUD-SEX: SEXUAL FLEXIBILITY AMONG RURAL WHITE STRAIGHT MEN  
WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN

by

TONY SILVA

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Department of Sociology  
and the Graduate School of the University of Oregon  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

September 2018

DISSERTATION APPROVAL PAGE

Student: Tony Silva

Title: Bud-Sex: Sexual Flexibility Among Rural White Straight Men Who Have Sex With Men

This dissertation has been accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of Sociology by:

CJ Pascoe	Chairperson
Raoul Liévanos	Core Member
Kristen Barber	Core Member
Peter Alilunas	Institutional Representative

and

Janet Woodruff-Borden      Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

Original approval signatures are on file with the University of Oregon Graduate School.

Degree awarded September 2018.

© 2018 Tony Silva

## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

Tony Silva

Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Sociology

September 2018

Title: Bud-Sex: Sexual Flexibility Among Rural White Straight Men Who Have Sex With Men

I interviewed 60 rural, white, straight-identified men who have sex with men (MSM). I did so to answer three main research questions: How do rural, white, straight MSM understand their gender and sexual identity? How do their experiences with sexual flexibility relate to the ways in which they understand their gender and sexual identity? How do whiteness and rurality shape how they understand their gender and sexual identity? While participants shared a diversity of experiences, all aligned themselves with *straight culture*. Participants had varying levels of attractions to women and different sexual histories, but all identified as straight. Sexual identities are not simply descriptors for sexual orientation. They also indicate feelings of belonging in certain communities and cultures, and not belonging in others. My research shows that rural straight MSM are not closeted gay or bisexual men. They are straight men who occasionally enjoy sex with other men. Their narratives, I argue, highlight the difference between sexual orientation, sexual identity, and sexual culture. The ways participants had sex with other men—what I call *bud-sex*—both reinforced and reflected their alignment with straight culture.

Enjoyment of *straight culture*, I argue, is the main reason the men I interviewed in this study identified as straight. None of them considered sex with men an important

aspect of their identity. “Straight” was an identity that encompassed participants’ alignment with mainstream heterosexual institutions, such as marriage, and straight communities, to which they and most people they knew belonged. Collectively, these institutions and communities comprise straight culture. Participants considered straightness an identity, a way of life, and/or a community. Having sex with men was largely irrelevant to their sexual identity and how they understood their masculinity. Talking to them highlights how straightness is cultivated in a variety of institutions and contexts, and in numerous ways. Because participants grew up in and/or lived in white-majority rural areas, the rural straight culture to which they felt connected was by definition white. Their enjoyment of straight culture—and the institutions, communities, and ways of life attached to it—was central to their identification as straight and masculine.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME OF AUTHOR: Tony Silva

### GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

University of Oregon, Eugene  
Southern Illinois University, Carbondale  
California State University, Chico  
Shasta College, Redding, CA

### DEGREES AWARDED:

Doctor of Philosophy, Sociology, 2018, University of Oregon, Eugene  
Master of Science, Sociology, 2016, University of Oregon, Eugene  
Master of Arts, Sociology, 2015, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale  
Bachelor of Arts, Sociology, 2012, California State University, Chico

### AREAS OF SPECIAL INTEREST:

Sexuality  
Gender  
Rural sociology  
Race/ethnicity  
Qualitative and quantitative methods

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Graduate Employee, Sociology Department, University of Oregon, September  
2015-July 2018

Teaching Assistant, Sociology Department, Southern Illinois University,  
Carbondale, August 2014-May 2015

Research Assistant, Sociology Department, Southern Illinois University,  
Carbondale, August 2013-May 2014

### GRANTS, AWARDS, AND HONORS:

Marquina Faculty-Graduate Student Collaboration Award, Sociology Department,  
University of Oregon, 2018

Wasby-Johnson Sociology Dissertation Research Award, Sociology Department,  
University of Oregon, 2017

Distinguished Article Award, American Sociological Association Sexualities  
Section, 2017

Sociology Graduate Student Research Award for Publication, Sociology  
Department, University of Oregon, 2017

PUBLICATIONS:

Silva, Tony J. 2018. “‘Helpin’ a Buddy out’: Perceptions of Identity and Behaviour among Rural Straight Men That Have Sex with Each Other.” *Sexualities* 21 (1–2): 68–89. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460716678564>.

Silva, Tony J. and Rachel Bridges Whaley. 2018. “Bud-Sex, Dude-Sex, and Heteroflexible Men: The Relationship between Straight Identification and Social Attitudes in a Nationally Representative Sample of Men with Same-Sex Attractions or Sexual Practices.” *Sociological Perspectives* 61 (3): 426–43. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0731121417745024>.

Silva, Tony J. 2017a. “Bud-Sex: Constructing Normative Masculinity among Rural Straight Men That Have Sex With Men.” *Gender & Society* 31 (1): 51–73. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0731121417745024>.

Silva, Tony J. 2017b. “A Quantitative Test of Critical Heterosexuality Theory: Predicting Straight Identification in a Nationally Representative Sample.” *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, November, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-017-0307-8>.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank the members of my dissertation committee for their feedback, which greatly improved my project: CJ Pascoe, Raoul Liévanos, Peter Alilunas, and Kristen Barber. Their helpful and insightful feedback was critical to how I gathered and analyzed data. I also wish to thank them for working with me on an expedited timeline, after I unexpectedly (and excitingly) was offered a postdoctoral scholar position for the next year. Thank you to Raoul for helping me to analyze intersections of race and place, starting in a graduate seminar and continuing as a committee member. Thank you to Kristen for helping me to develop as a gender scholar in my previous life at Southern Illinois University Carbondale, and for helping me transition to the University of Oregon. I would not have transferred to the UO without her amazing mentorship in those years. I also want to call attention to CJ's advising. Over the course of three years at the University of Oregon, her feminist mentorship was central to my development as a scholar. This included multiple meetings per month to discuss and provide feedback about project ideas, data analysis, and questions and topics for me to consider. Thank you to CJ for reading my dissertation chapters multiple times, sometimes even hundreds of pages per week. Her advising has shaped my dissertation, and more broadly, my intellectual trajectory as a scholar.



This project is dedicated to the 60 men I interviewed, who opened up to me about their personal lives. For many, I was the only person they ever told about their experiences. Thank you to these men for trusting me, and for helping me complete my dissertation. This project is also dedicated to my loved ones, in no particular order: Mom and Dad, Kari, Shon, Tanya, Lauren, Ashley, and Janeth. I would not have completed this dissertation without their love and support.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
Sexual Orientation Versus Sexual Identity .....	4
Sexual Cultures .....	12
Intersectionality.....	16
Intersections of Rural Space, Gender, Sexuality, and Race.....	17
The Methodological Nuts-and-Bolts.....	24
Why These Rural Spaces? .....	27
Scope of the Study .....	30
II. STRAIGHT CULTURE.....	35
Learning Masculinity and Heterosexuality in Rural Straight Culture .....	37
Childhood Family of Origin.....	39
Religion.....	42
School or Youth Activities, Including Youth Sports .....	46
Adult Families.....	50
Happiness in Their Relationships to Women.....	54
Masculinity and Rural Straight Culture .....	56
Straightness and Masculinity .....	63
Heterosexuality in Rural America .....	65
Gay Culture.....	68
Homophobia.....	72

Chapter	Page
Whiteness and Rurality .....	75
The White Spatial Imaginary .....	75
Chapter Summary .....	80
III. WHY THEY HAVE SEX WITH MEN .....	82
“I Like Dicks, I Don’t Like Men”: The Complexity of Sexual Orientation .....	84
Growing Older: Not Ready to Give Up Sex .....	89
Changing Sexual Attractions .....	94
Sex with Men: Easier or Better .....	100
Bonding, Cuddling, and Relieving Masculinity Pressures .....	107
Chapter Summary .....	110
IV. “JUST HELPIN’ A BUDDY OUT” .....	113
Guys Like Myself .....	115
Sex with Men: Straight, Masculine, and Helping Marital Bliss .....	127
“Helpin’ a Buddy Out” and Acting on “Urges” .....	128
Sex with Men: Neither Gay nor Feminine .....	131
Not Cheating: Extramarital Sex with Men.....	135
Chapter Summary .....	145
V. FRIENDSHIP, INTIMACY, AND LOVE BETWEEN MEN .....	147
Sexual Relationships and Friends with Benefits.....	150
Deeply Intimate Friendships: Best Buds.....	158
Love Towards Men.....	164
Chapter Summary .....	172

Chapter	Page
VI. CONCLUSION: TOWARD A SEXUAL CLTURES FRAMEWORK .....	175
Practical Implications: Sexual Minority Wellbeing and Sexual Cultures .....	176
Theoretical Implications and Directions for Future Research .....	182
Heterosexual and Queer Sexual Cultures .....	182
Intersectionality, Habitus, and Sexual Cultures .....	183
Sex and Sociology.....	184
A Note of Caution.....	185
Generational and Life Course Factors .....	187
Future Directions for Research .....	190
APPENDIX: I’LL SEND YOU MY [DICK] PIC .....	192
“50 Shades of Cain”: Sexualization and Emotional Attachment.....	194
Dick Pics, Sexual Solicitation, and Masturbating on the Phone.....	197
Never Open Your Email in Public .....	202
Benefits for Participants.....	203
REFERENCES CITED.....	205

## LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Participant Characteristics .....	27

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The 60 men I interviewed opened up to me about their sexual and romantic lives. Some of their narratives were quite intimate. Larry<sup>1</sup> shared that he actually fell in love with a man named Nolan. Both lived in rural Wyoming. Larry and Nolan met on Craigslist while both were in relationships with women. Each told their woman partner that they had met through their jobs, and introduced one another as friends. They and their women partners even spent time together as couples. Larry and Nolan had sex with no other men while they were together. They also saw themselves as unquestionably straight, even as they enjoyed sexually and romantically intimate weekend camping trips. Larry described their dynamic as similar to that in *Brokeback Mountain*:

He's actually one of our [prominent community members], and he is married, has family, great guy, still friends today. We consequently do not hook up anymore. It's weird to say this, but I feel like we kind of started falling in love with each other a little bit. You have to understand Wyoming. Did you ever see Brokeback Mountain? That is very, very in line with how things are. Different times, because obviously those are olden, portrayed in a different era, but that would be very true to how things would happen in Wyoming. So very secretive, and our connections weren't real frequent. [There was] anticipation of the next time we get to see each other. We did go for a couple weekends away. We could do that because of what we did and it was off the radar and it was somethin' that we both could say hey I'm headed up with Nolan to, whatever, we're going to go do this. So that was very very normal, so you didn't have to hide in that respect, where you were going to be. You could answer the phone if you were in the truck with him or whatever. And same on his side, so it was very easy for that. But I think we both reached a place where we kind of, gosh, weird to say, but I felt like we were starting to fall in love with each other and we both decided, look, this is only going to be a nightmare, we have to stop. I got to quit you [laughs].

Larry described a deep sense of connection, and even love, for Nolan. The fact that their women partners knew about one another (not including their sex) meant it was easier for

---

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> Top: inserting in anal sex. Bottom: receiving. Versatile: topping and bottoming, with the same man or with different men.

them to spend time together. Eventually they felt like they were becoming too close, however, and decided to end the sexual and romantic aspect of their relationship. Larry expressed that he felt like he was “going through a breakup” at this time:

Oh, Tony, it was horrible. Really, I felt like I was going through a breakup. And he did too. It's difficult because you can't talk about that with anybody, you can't say oh, kind of splittin' up right now, so I don't feel like being social. You have to be on top of your game like nothing ever happened, and on the inside you're shattered.

Larry felt such love for Nolan that their separation as romantic partners was emotionally painful. He and Nolan remained close, however:

We are still friends so that aspect is still happening. I went up to his ranch last night and had dinner with his family. And it lasted for probably a year. I worked [with him], so we did lots of things together. I would say a good year of us being in a relationship. Back to the question of could you ever see yourself in a relationship with a man, I could. With this guy, different place, he's wonderful, we connected on that level. And that's the closest that I felt to feeling romantic or having a relationship with a man.

Larry felt a deep emotional connection to Nolan, and remained close friends despite breaking up. Most men did not report feelings of love like Larry did, but all—like Larry and Nolan—worked to ensure any feelings they had for men did not affect other parts of their lives. Larry was not a closeted gay man. He identified as straight, and even reported that his sexual attractions were predominately to women. Nonetheless, what attractions he did have for men led him to experience sexual and romantic passion with Nolan.

Unlike Larry, Cain reported no love for another man. Cain was simply looking for what he called a “regular bud” to keep his “urges” in check. Until he found that regular bud, he was content with hookups. He called me for several years to inform me about what he called “hot updates.” One of the hookups he found most thrilling involved

topping<sup>2</sup> a man on a church pulpit when no one else was around. Another was having sex with a man in a department store dressing room, *while his wife was outside*:

It's almost like the closer I am to being caught, the greater the thrill. I'll give you an example. My wife and I went shopping one time in the mall. She was picking out clothes for me, and there was this real cute college guy that was also tryin' on clothes. They had kind of like a bathroom setup in the stalls or whatever, and I kind of looked at him, and I could tell he was kind of interested. And so, I sat down and I just, kinda moved my foot just a bit, and fuck he was all over me. And so, the thing is I was going back and forth getting clothes from my wife, who was right outside the dressing room. And here I was going back, and I worked the guy in my stall and he was nursing on my cock, sucking on my cock as I was going back and forth getting clothes. And fuck, she would have killed both of us, had she known, but it was just, fuck, it was so exciting, it was just, so thrilling. I don't know how to describe it.

Cain found it “thrilling” to have sex in situations when the risk of discovery was high. Of the many hookups he described, another involved having sex with a man in his home while his wife was upstairs, asleep. Cain found sex with men to be exciting and taboo.

Based on these narratives, it seems like Larry and Cain are completely different. They share more in common than it first appears, however. Both they—and other participants in this study—prevented, cut off, or bounded romantic attachments to men. Doing so allowed them to maintain their relationships with women partners and preserve their alignment with straight culture. The ways they had sex with other men—what I call *bud-sex*—both reinforced and reflected this alignment. Enjoyment of *straight culture*, I argue, is the main reason the men I interviewed in this study identified as straight. None of them considered sex with men an important aspect of their identity. As Mitch said about his sex with men, “I wouldn't say it defines me or anything like that.”

In total, I interviewed 60 rural, white, straight men who have sex with men (MSM). I did so to answer three main research questions: How do rural, white, straight

---

<sup>2</sup> Top: inserting in anal sex. Bottom: receiving. Versatile: topping and bottoming, with the same man or with different men.



men who have sex with men understand their gender and sexual identity? How do their experiences with sexual flexibility relate to the ways in which they understand their gender and sexual identity? How do whiteness and rurality shape how they understand their gender and sexual identity? While they shared a diversity of experiences, all aligned themselves with *straight culture*. Participants had varying levels of attractions to women and different sexual histories, but all identified as straight. Sexual identities are not simply descriptors for sexual orientation. They also indicate feelings of belonging in certain communities and cultures, and not belonging in others. My research shows that rural straight MSM are not closeted gay or bisexual men. They are straight men who occasionally enjoy sex with other men. Their narratives, I argue, highlight the difference between sexual orientation, sexual identity, and sexual culture.

### *Sexual Orientation Versus Sexual Identity*

The difference between sexual *orientation* and sexual *identity* is key to understanding these men's narratives. Sexual orientation includes emotional attractions and sexual attractions, practices, desires, and fantasies (Savin-Williams 2014). Each of these elements is related, but distinct (Priebe and Svedin 2013). They also do not always cluster in ways suggested by common sexual identities. For instance, 3.6-4.1% of men and 7.6-9.5% of women have a small amount of same-sex sexual and/or romantic attraction (Savin-Williams and Vrangalova 2013; Savin-Williams 2017). Sexual identities, on the other hand, refer to how individuals understand their sexuality and their relation to social groups (e.g., gay communities). They usually cannot capture the complex ways in

which individuals experience their sexual orientation. They also often reflect the *sexual cultures* to which individuals feel they belong (more on this in the next section).

Sexual behavior, attraction, and identity are distinct. Many individuals incorrectly label others as gay or bisexual, even for a single same-sex sexual encounter (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Same-sex sexual *behavior* does not necessitate a gay/lesbian or bisexual *identity*, however, nor does the presence of same-sex *attraction*. Individuals are in the metaphorical closet only if they are hiding an *identity* that they see as a key part of themselves (Seidman 2002). For instance, many individuals secretly identify as LGBTQ, but cannot be open about it because of their homophobic social context. These people are in the closet. They differ from straight-identified MSM, who are secretive about their sex with men but still genuinely feel as though “straight” describes them better than any other identity. Straight MSM do not perceive sex with men as meaningful to their identity. Of course, identities are not entirely the result of individual choice. They are shaped by social and historical context, which marginalize individuals of some identities (lesbian, gay, bisexual, etc.) and give unearned benefits to individuals with other (straight) identities. This encourages all people to identify as straight.

Sexual *identities* differ based on historical time period, culture, and social context. Common sexual identities today used most often in the West include bisexual, gay/lesbian, and straight. They have their roots in several interrelated historical developments that occurred in the mid- to late-nineteenth century through the middle of the twentieth. Individuals engaged in same-sex sexual *practices* prior to this point, but these acts were not usually associated with a sexual *identity*. Subcultures of MSM in urban areas first emerged in the eighteenth century, as in London (Norton 2006). Before

this point, most people in the West understood particular sexual acts between men, like anal sex, as something any man could feel temptation to experience.

Medical, government, and religious institutions played key roles in the creation and perpetuation of “heterosexuality” as an identity. Emerging medical disciplines helped create heterosexuality as a social category, and constructed homosexuality as its undesirable opposite (Foucault 1988; Katz 1995). Prior to this point, most people did not perceive sex with men and/or women as proof of an internal disposition like “heterosexuality,” “homosexuality,” or “bisexuality.” Medical practitioners explained that sexual practices were characteristics of particular *types* of people (Foucault 1988). Following this, bureaucratic practices in U.S. immigration, welfare, and military institutions in the twentieth century helped link disparate sexual and relational practices, gender expressions, and physical embodiments to a single homosexual status (Canaday 2009). These institutions actually helped to define homosexuality and heterosexuality. In the twentieth century, the federal government also helped spread a national discourse about “normal” gender and sexuality. To do so it used idealized images of rural white people as examples of what purportedly normal sexuality and gender looked like for men and women. It also intervened in rural spaces through community organizations to reinforce heterosexuality and gender normativity (Rosenburg 2016). Today, government-funded marriage promotion efforts similarly teach that heterosexuality and gender normativity are critical to healthy marriages, which are in turn key to social stability (Heath 2009). Thus, the state helped to create sexual identities, and continues to reward heterosexuality. Religious institutions also traditionally valorized heterosexuality, part of their broader goal of encouraging conventional marriage and reproduction. This helps to

explain why religiosity is a key motivator behind anti-LGBQ bigotry today (Sherkat, Powell-Williams, Maddox, and de Vries 2011; Whitehead 2010). It also helps explain why school religiosity discourages LGBQ identification (Wilkinson and Pearson 2013).

Economic changes also encouraged the spread of sexual identities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Women increasingly entered the formal paid workforce and men began engaging in intellectual and interpersonal labor more than physical labor. Occupational gender segregation reinforced understandings of men and women as social opposites, and economic changes threatened these understandings. New heterosexual identities signaled that men and women had purportedly normal masculinity and femininity, respectively, despite economic changes (Chauncey 1994). Further, wage labor (D'Emilio 1997), especially wage labor tied to corporations (Boag 2003), allowed for individual economic self-sufficiency. This meant that individuals no longer had to rely on a family unit to survive. Additionally, urbanization allowed individuals with a common sense of sexual difference to form communities, facilitating the adoption of gay/lesbian identities (D'Emilio 1997). The combination of all these factors was especially important for women, who previously had far fewer opportunities to be economically self-sufficient and thus form a collective sense of sexual difference (Faderman 2001). From the mid- to late-nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, sexual identities slowly disseminated across the West.

Understandings of sexuality differ between time periods and cultures, as well as within cultures. In the early nineteenth century, for instance, Victorians considered sexual passion and love to be mostly unrelated. This facilitated socially accepted, romantic friendships between women (Faderman 1991; Smith-Rosenberg 1975) and men (Katz

2001; Rotundo 1989). These friendships contained various types and degrees of physical contact, like sleeping in the same bed to cuddling—or more. This changed as the current system of sexual classification became widespread and pathologized these relationships. Today, mainstream understandings of sexual orientation link emotional and physical attractions.

Cross-culturally, migration between different countries can change how individuals perceive and experience sexuality, as with MSM who migrate from Mexico to the US (Cantú Jr. 2009; Carrillo 2018; Carrillo and Fontdevila 2014). Sexual identification can also differ within countries, depending on the weight individuals give to sexual attractions versus current sexual partnering practices (Rust 1992); the presence or lack thereof of emotional attractions (Adam 2000); stereotypes about LGB identity labels (e.g., lesbian women are butch) or a lack of awareness of alternative identities (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1995); or gendered interpretations of penetration (Carrillo and Fontdevila 2014). Cross-national research indicates that how individualistic and gender egalitarian a country is affects how individuals perceive homosexuality (Frank and McEneaney 1999; Frank, Bayliss, and Boutcher 2010). This, in turn, may facilitate the adoption of non-heterosexual identity labels, as it becomes a more socially acceptable option. Indeed, living in contexts with legal recognition of same-sex couples may facilitate sexual minority identification (Charlton et al. 2016).

The current organization of sexuality between men and women as “heterosexual” does not reflect an ahistorical social imperative. In the US Northeast during the colonial era, for instance, sexuality was organized on a reproductive/non-reproductive basis, such that most non-reproductive acts were viewed as similar offenses (Katz 1995). There was

no social validation of sexual pleasure within this system. Heterosexual identification, however, helped to normalize sexual pleasure between middle-class men and women (Katz 1995). Freud's (1975) insistence that humans were predisposed toward seeking sexual pleasure, especially other-sex genital pleasure, facilitated this shift. Thus, *heterosexuality as an identity is a social and historical category* that has its roots in mid-nineteenth and early-twentieth century historical changes (Katz 1995). Today, heterosexuality is an identity and a set of social and sexual practices and experiences (Jackson 1999). Straight identification grants individuals considerable social benefits relative to LGBQ individuals (Messner 1999), such as freedom from sexuality-based discrimination and other forms of marginalization.

Heterosexuality is also an institution and a broad social force. It upholds binary understandings of gender, and consequently helps to create and reinforce social inequalities between men and women (Jackson 1999; Rich 1980). Heteronormativity is part of the fabric of US society, evident in how parents raise their children (Martin 2009; Solebello and Elliott 2011); gendered sexual socialization in preschools (Gansen 2017); peer interactions in elementary school (Myers and Raymond 2010) through high school (Pascoe 2011); formal and informal curricula in educational institutions (Pascoe and Silva forthcoming); and how most institutions operate (Hearn and Parkin 1995; Hearn et al. 1989). All of this combined encourages straight identification. Nonetheless, many currently straight-identified men and women considered alternative identities in their past before ultimately adopting a straight identity (Morgan 2012). This reinforces both the social construction of sexual identities and the power of compulsory heterosexuality.

There are two main takeaways from this body of research. There may be biological influences to sexual *orientation*, but sexual *identification*—how individuals and groups understand and label sexuality—differs by culture, time period, and social context. As social or historical context changes, how individuals understand and identify their sexuality can also change. Social institutions also affect how individuals understand and express sexuality, so sexual identification is not a “natural” reflection of sexuality.

A small base of qualitative research seeks to understand *why* individuals sexually identify the way they do, given the complexity of orientation. In other words, why do some individuals with same-sex attractions and/or practices identify as LGBTQ, whereas others identify as straight? Many working-class women identify as straight despite enjoying sex with women, since they view their status as mothers or partners to men to preclude LGBTQ identification (Budnick 2016). Some middle-class women who have sex with women similarly feel that straight describes them best, in part because they do not want to end their partnerships to men (Walker 2014). Interviews with straight MSM show that many bolster their straight identities by framing sex with men as emotionless and by emphasizing exclusive or primary attractions to women (Carrillo and Hoffman 2016; 2018). Some also feel that “gay” indicates femininity and “bisexual” is too stigmatized or ambiguous to describe them (Duffin 2016). Content analyses of Craigslist personals ads suggest similar themes as Carrillo and Hoffman’s (2016; 2018) studies (Reynolds 2015; Robinson and Vidal-Ortiz 2013), and reinforce that many straight-identified men who hook up with other men enjoy straight privilege and culture, including heteronormativity (Ward 2015). Qualitative research, overall, shows that there are many factors other than attractions and sexual practices that influence straight identification. These include the

meanings individuals make of childrearing, other-sex partnerships, and gay or bisexual identities.

While impossible to determine the generalizability of qualitative studies, nationally representative surveys offer hints. The 2013-2015 National Survey of Family Growth (Copen, Chandra, and Febo-Vazquez 2016) and the 2013 National Health Interview Survey (Ward et al. 2014) both show that a much higher percentage of individuals report same-sex practices and/or attractions than a LGBTQ identity. This is despite understandings of a “one-act rule of homosexuality” (Schilt and Westbrook 2009). Little quantitative research explores *why* people identify as straight, however. My own research using the 2011-2013 National Survey of Family Growth shows that conservative attitudes about gays/lesbians, as well as childrearing, is strongly associated with straight identification for American men aged 15-44, the survey’s sample (Silva and Whaley 2017). The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health also shows that political conservatism and religiosity are related to straight identification among men and women in their 20s and 30s (Silva 2017). That study also shows that increases to religiosity are associated with changing *to* a straight identity for those who identified as something else in a prior year of the survey. Both of these projects controlled for attractions and sexual practices, isolating the effects of other characteristics. Thus, nationally representative surveys suggest that attitudes are key to sexual identification.

Recent research also shows that there are distinct “types” of straight-identified individuals with same-sex sexuality. Some researchers have used latent class analysis (LCA) or latent profile analysis (LPA) to find sub-groupings within a population.



Conventional regression models are “variable-centered” because they examine the association between particular independent variables and the dependent variable of straight identification. LCA and LPA are “person-centered” forms of analysis that utilize variables to find groups of people who are distinct from other groups on the basis of those variables (Grzanka 2016). Kuperberg and Walker (2018), for instance, use LCA to examine straight-identified college students whose last hookup partner was the same sex. Their analysis suggests that there are distinct sub-types characterized by differences in religiosity, homophobia, and circumstances of the hookup. My other research (Silva 2018) builds on this by using nationally representative data of individuals 15-44. It shows that conservative gender attitudes and homophobia *as variables* significantly predict straight identification among individuals with same-sex sexuality. LCA analyses, however, show that about half of straight-identified men and women are neither very homophobic nor very conservative in terms of gender. This suggests that it is alignment with straight culture that ties these individuals together, not simply homophobia or conservatism. Qualitative research, such as this project, can explore these themes more in depth.

### *Sexual Cultures*

While sexual identities seem deeply personal, in fact they indicate relationships to certain people, groups, and communities—and alignment with the cultures tying them together. There is a rich literature about minority sexual cultures, especially those involving LGBTQ people. Some explore geographic variation in identification or identity expression, including Gray’s (2009) ethnography of rural queer youth in Kentucky,

Brown-Saracino's (2018) investigation of women's LBQ identities across four American cities, and Carrillo's (2017) exploration of Mexican gay men who migrated to the U.S. Others examine smaller, niche subcultures or communities. By subculture, I mean a culture that is part of larger culture, but is a distinct grouping within it. For instance, Hennen (2008) details the unique subculture of gay Bears, Faeries, and Leathermen. All identify as gay, but Bears valorize large, hairy men that act conventionally masculine but also form emotionally intimate relationships with other men; Fairies embrace femininity; and Leathermen perform exaggerated masculinity and often re-cast middle age as a desirable attribute. Orne (2017), relatedly, examines queer men's sexual networks in Chicago during a time of assimilation and gentrification. Studies such as these show distinct sexual communities and cultures, which shape individuals' identities and social practices.

Although there is work on heterosexual culture, almost none of it is named or examined as such. What work exists suggests that there are many straight cultures. There are fairly broad straight cultures that researchers can analyze with cross-national research, as well as smaller straight cultures that exist side-by-side within countries. Each has distinct features, yet all—by virtue of being *straight* cultures—centralize heterosexual identification, and most normalize gender inequality. Schalet (2011) provides one cross-cultural snapshot of straight cultures by examining approaches to teenage sexuality in the United States and the Netherlands. She finds that Americans tend to view teenage sexuality as something dangerous that needs to be controlled, whereas many parents in the Netherlands support teenage sexual education and responsible sexual exploration. The U.S. and the Netherlands, examined at the national level, have distinct straight cultures.

Similarly, González-López (2005) documents the sexual and romantic lives of straight Mexicans who immigrated to the United States. Migration can put individuals in contact with new straight cultures, and—in combination with other social, economic, and structural factors—can change how individuals experience their sexuality. There are also distinct sexual cultures within countries, including the U.S. American evangelical Christians, for instance, have a distinct sexual culture that prioritizes heterosexuality, marriage, and sex for the purpose of procreating or maintaining fulfilling marriages (Burke 2016; Diefendorf 2015; Gerber 2011). This is in contrast to more liberal, secular, and urban straight cultures, like those on many college campuses (Armstrong, England, and Fogarty 2012; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). Regardless of the distinctions between straight cultures, however, most preserve inequalities between men and women. This helps to explain why surveys consistently show that a higher proportion of men orgasm during sexual encounters than their women sexual partners (e.g., Frederick et al. 2018), and why women perform more housework (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2015) and childcare (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016) on average than men.

One of the only projects to identify straight culture *as* a culture is Ward (2015), who examined straight white MSM in urban or military contexts. Ward (2015:4) argues “that homosexuality is an often invisible, but nonetheless vital ingredient—a constitutive element—of heterosexual masculinity.” I do not make this argument. Instead, I argue that the men I interviewed in this project help to show what straight culture is and how many men come to identify with it. Most straight men do not have sex with other men—but those who do help highlight that heterosexuality is a culture, and that many people align themselves with it regardless of their attractions or sexual practices.

There are three main takeaways from previous research on sexual cultures. First, sexual identification reflects alignment with certain sexual cultures over others. This includes the people, networks, and communities that feel attached to them, and the institutions that uphold these cultures. Thus, straight identification reflects alignment with a straight culture, and gay identification reflects alignment with a gay culture. Men who identify in ways that challenge how most people understand sexual identity, like straight MSM, can highlight the cultural aspects of sexual identification. This is not purely voluntaristic: American society (indeed, most societies) give unearned benefits to straight people relative to LGBTQ people. Straight people do not experience discrimination, prejudice, or inequality on the basis of their straightness; LGBTQ people do. This encourages everyone to identify as straight. Second, there are many straight cultures. Little research has examined these cultures *as* cultures, however. Heterosexuality is a hegemonic unmarked category, similar to the category “white” in the United States. This necessitates research that examines the communities, institutions, and contexts that characterize these straight sexual cultures, as well as the interpretations and practices of people who feel connected to them. Third, while there are distinct straight cultures, they have many similarities and share considerable overlap. All centralize heterosexual identification, and most normalize gender inequalities—in different ways and to varying extents.

The straight culture I examine is that of white-majority rural America. My findings have implications for other straight cultures in the U.S., however, given how much overlap they share. It is perhaps best to conceptualize “straight culture” as an umbrella concept, with particular straight cultures—with their many similarities—

beneath its hood. This project is not a story of closeted gay or bisexual men, nor is it a look at a straight sexual culture disconnected from broader American society. Its findings are not empirically representative, but have implications for better understanding straight culture(s) more broadly.

### *Intersectionality*

This dissertation uses an intersectional approach to understand the relationships between straightness, masculinity, whiteness, and rurality. McCall (2005, 1771) defines intersectionality as “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations.” Relationships between—and intersections of—social locations affect individuals’ lived experiences (Crenshaw 1993). Identities should be examined not in isolation, but as they intersect with other identities and social locations. McCall (2005) identifies three approaches for analyzing intersectionality in empirical research. Anticategorical complexity deconstructs identities and categories. Intracategorical complexity examines groups who experience multiple intersecting oppressions. Lastly, McCall’s (2005, 1773) favored approach, intercategory complexity, “requires that scholars provisionally adopt existing analytical categories to document relationships of inequality among social groups and changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions.” While categories and identities are socially constructed and ever changing, it is fruitful for researchers to explore relationships between these groups. What is key is that “[r]elationships of inequality among social groups do not enter as background or contextual or discursive or ideological factors, as they often do in the other two approaches, but as the focus of the

analysis itself” (McCall 2005, 1785-6). Similarly, Choo and Ferree (2010, 146) advocate analytical approaches that examine the interactions between “macrostructures of inequality” and “microstructures of social construction of meaning.”

Following McCall (2005) and Choo and Ferree (2010), this study analyzes straight-identified, white, rural MSM who experience numerous intersecting forms of structural advantages on the basis of their race, sexual identification, and sex. It does so to better understand how intersections of race and space influence individuals’ meaning-making processes related to sexuality and gender. In particular, we can examine how intersecting social advantages shape sexual and gender subjectivities. This analysis helps to address Stein and Plummer’s (1996) call for queer empirical emphasis on dominant groups, identities, and institutions, rather than just those at the margins of society. It also helps to address Warner’s (1993) call for queer theoretical approaches to examine normativity. Additionally, this study adds to the literature on intersectionality, since many intersectional analyses focus on marginalized groups rather than those with structural advantages and under-analyze the extent to which place is a central component of lived experience. While analyzing the experiences of marginalized groups is critical, scholars should also examine narratives of individuals who experience numerous structural advantages. Doing so will allow researchers to better understand how structural inequalities shape individuals’ meaning-making processes, especially in combination with space.

*Intersections of Rural Space, Gender, Sexuality, and Race*

Most studies about sexuality and gender focus on urban areas (Halberstam 2005). Their findings are not necessarily generalizable to rural locations, since geographic area affects how individuals perceive and express gender and sexuality. Rurality is a particularly important site for studying sexual identity, since in rural areas there are smaller networks of individuals with non-normative gender and sexual expressions. Consequently, media representations are influential for the gender and sexual identities of rural youth who come to identify as LGBTQ (Gray 2009). However, rural MSM's identification as straight is not simply due to a lack of knowledge about alternative identities. They have seen at least some media representation of LGBQ individuals. Space shapes social life, so it is critical to examine how space intersects with gender and sexuality. As Gieryn (2000:473) notes about place, specific geographic locations and particularized spatial dynamics shape "social structural categories, differences, and hierarchies; arranges patterns of face-to-face interaction that constitute network-formation and collective action; embodies and secures otherwise intangible cultural norms, identities, memories—and values." Gieryn's (2000) analysis is of specific *places*, rather than broader types of *spaces*, though it is useful for considering space as well. Specifically, I examine U.S.-based rural space in the Midwest, Mountain West, and Pacific Northwest. While the men I interview live in particular places—like Larry in rural Wyoming—I analyze broader rural *space* rather than specific rural *places*.

Spatial dynamics shape gender expressions. Most rural men do not have socially viable alternatives to conventional expressions of masculinity, as some urban men do. The masculinity they construct reflects the rigid expectations of rural men today (Courtenay 2006). Due to differing social contexts, expressions of masculinity in rural

areas are distinct from those in urban locations. “Rural masculinity” refers to masculinity as it is “constructed within what rural social scientists would recognize as rural spaces and sites” (Campbell and Bell 2000:540), which are themselves difficult to define (Pini, Brandth, and Little 2015). Rural masculinities differ based on local context as well as intersections of social identities, and central to many of them are physical labor and toughness (Morris 2008; Kayzak 2012; Little 2015). Masculinity is critically important for rural gay men, as it provides them some social acceptance in their communities (Annes and Redlin 2012; Boulden 2001; Fellows 1998; Kazyak 2012).

While “rural” is difficult to define (Pini, Brandth, and Little 2015) outside of statistical classifications, gender scholars *do* document differing expressions of gender and sexuality in many rural areas compared to urban areas. This helps explain why right-wing militias that valorize white masculinity mostly exist in rural areas (Kimmel and Ferber 2000). Research that examines intersections of rurality, sexuality, and gender highlight the fruitfulness of examining rural life while recognizing its variability and complex relationships with urban areas. Rural and urban areas are tied together due to social and economic links, as well as easy travel between the two (Lichter and Brown 2011). How people in them perceive gender and sexuality is, however, distinct. Despite links between urban and rural areas, many rural men define themselves in opposition to *representations* of urbanity. As Leap (2017) details, the rural white men in his study constructed a specific white, straight, working-class masculinity that they considered unique to rural men. Thus, although it may be a relatively short drive to a city from a rural area, how residents understand and construct gender and sexuality is often distinct



from people in those cities. Combined, research shows that masculinity is central to what it means to be a man in many rural areas.

Historical investigation shows that sexual and gender nonconformity is not simply a product of urban culture. Non-normative expressions were common in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the mostly rural American West (Boag 2011; Johnson 2013). Community and individual responses to people with non-normative gender expressions varied greatly; many were met with relative tolerance or even acceptance. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, however, emerging discourses from media and medical institutions constructed the frontier as white, heterosexual, and masculine, destroying or reworking memories of non-normative gender and sexuality on the frontier. According to the myth, sexual and gender diversity mostly did not exist on the frontier, and when it appeared, it was due to the purported pathology of people of color. This is one reason why today there is a widespread assumption that LGBTQ people only live in urban areas. Understandings of purportedly healthy gender and sexual expressions changed in rural areas—and urban ones—only when a national discourse about gender and sexuality spread across America by the mid twentieth century (Rosenburg 2016). Relatedly, it was only during the 1960s, when homosexuality was linked to the racial civil rights struggle, that Christian churches and conservative political movements in the U.S. South cast it as a threat to social stability (Howard 1999). Understandings of purportedly normal gender and sexuality are racialized as white.

Individuals who engage in non-normative sexual or gender practices live in urban, suburban, and rural areas, all over the U.S. Contextual factors related to their location shape how they experience their sexuality. Relatedly, urban LGBTQ life is different

from—not better than—rural LGBTQ life (Gray, Johnson, and Gilley 2016). Although rural LGBTQ folks experience isolation and heterosexism, advantages for them include privacy and easy access to the outdoors, as well as feelings of belonging in tight-knit communities. Gray’s (2009) ethnography of queer youth in rural Kentucky shows that rural social contexts encourage conformity, rather than the queer visibility that is a hallmark of urban areas. It also highlights the importance of community interconnectedness for feelings of belonging in rural areas. Consequently, rural straight MSM do not identify as straight because they have no other option. Many LGBTQ people live in rural areas. Nationally representative research shows that gays and lesbians report similar levels of wellbeing whether they live in urban or rural areas (Wienke and Hill 2013). Rurality is not necessarily oppressive for those who live in it. Rural straight MSM identify as straight because they enjoy rural straight culture, not because they are trapped in the metaphorical closet.

Intersections of gender, sexuality, and rural space are racialized. Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical concepts are helpful to analyze this. Individuals are socially dispersed according to the types and amount of “capital” they possess, especially cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu 1985). By virtue of shared backgrounds and social positions, individuals “have every likelihood of having similar dispositions and interests and therefore of producing similar practices and adopting similar stances” (Bourdieu 1985:725). This manifests in different types of habitus. “Habitus” can be described as a disposition, so “less a set of conscious strategies and preferences than an embodied sense of the world and one’s place within it”; durable, owing to its development as part of socialization; and transposable into different situations and fields (Sallaz and Zavisca

2007:25). Habitus is a “common sense” way of viewing and moving through the world (Bourdieu 1989:19). For instance, Desmond (2006:393), in his ethnography of wildland firefighting, says a “country-masculine habitus” guides rural men’s “thoughts, tastes, and practices. It provides them with their fundamental sense of self; it structures how they understand the world around them; and it influences how they codify sameness and difference.” Thus, space and gender expression are inextricably connected—just as they are with race.

Key concepts from whiteness studies help clarify how space and race intersect: “white habitus” and the “white spatial imaginary.” Bonilla-Silva (2003) defines white habitus as a “racialized uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites’ racial tastes, perceptions, feelings, and emotions and their views on racial matters” (104). This facilitates negative views of non-whites and guides whites’ everyday practices, which whites see as ordinary, unremarkable, and natural. Whites’ segregated residential and social networks facilitate emotional bonds between whites and distance between whites and people of color (Bonilla-Silva 2016). Racialized spatial dynamics help form white habitus: Bonilla-Silva et al. (2006, 248) argue that it emerges due to “social and spatial boundaries and isolation of whites.” By creating and sustaining all- or mostly-white residential contexts, whites reproduce white habitus, which in turn reinforces white segregation and justifications for it.

Lipsitz (2011) similarly argues that white residential segregation helps form a “white spatial imaginary.” This “structures feelings as well as social institutions” (29) in that it idealizes individualism, homogenous spaces, controlled environments, and predictable behavior; hides social concerns; and views space as a means to increase

exchange value. While Lipsitz focuses primarily on the white spatial imaginary in the context of white suburbia, I use his concept to explore rurality. Many rural areas are also predominately white, due to historical tactics that excluded people of color (Pierce 2017). For decades banks denied agricultural business and suburban housing loans to people of color, and racially restrictive covenants banned people of color from living in white suburbs. The federal government legally enforced these tactics or even mandated them (e.g., in the case of government policies about which mortgages to insure). This helped to confine people of color, and especially black people, to inner cities (especially if they lived outside of the South). Additionally, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century railroad companies helped reshape populations by encouraging northern and central Europeans to settle along their lines. They did so by advertising in northern and central European nations and providing financial assistance to those who immigrated (Pierce 2017). They also provided free land for those they sought to make customers on their lines. The U.S. government subsidized these practices by providing land grants to railroad companies, helping to create a majority-white, rural, U.S. West. This is one example of Omi and Winant's (2015) description of a racial project. Thus, the state played an active role in shaping rural (white) space and, subsequently, the genesis and maintenance of the white spatial imaginary and white habitus.

Building on Bonilla-Silva (2003; 2006) and Lipsitz (2011), I argue that the white habitus and the white spatial imaginary are inextricably connected. The roots of both are in residential and social segregation, though they mutually construct one another. White habitus describes whites' attitudes and dispositions, which manifest themselves in material ways: for example, social relations and social practices that reinforce racially

segregated social networks. For instance, the social network of white people is on average 91% white, and 75% of white people have social networks with zero people of color (Jones 2014). In contrast, racial homogeneity is much lower among black people (65%) and Latinx people (46%). The white spatial imaginary also describes whites' attitudes, but more specifically whites' attitudes about individuals' relationships to (racialized) space. It affects how whites organize space in terms of built social environments, as with suburbs that facilitate tight social control over how individuals interact *with* and *in* space (e.g., neighborhood watches that report "suspicious-looking" individuals or activities). It also affects whites' practices, which create all- or mostly-white social and residential contexts. Thus, whites' practices have racialized spatial consequences. Both white habitus and the white spatial imaginary are key components of white subjectivities.

### *The Methodological Nuts-and-Bolts*

I posted advertisements in dozens of men-for-men casual encounters sections of Craigslist, which is organized regionally.<sup>3</sup> Unlike most other apps/websites, Craigslist was (at the time of the research) widely used, anonymous, free, and frequented by individuals with a variety of sexual identities. Of the 654 men that inquired about participation between 2014-2017, 60 agreed to participate in a semi-structured interview: 56 over the phone and 4 in person. It was fortuitous that I completed interviews in late 2017. On March 23, 2018, Craigslist banned personal ads and deleted sections of the

---

<sup>3</sup> I also advertised information about the study in a Grindr profile, but only for a short time. Grindr is a popular location-based app among gay and bisexual men. Most men who contacted me on Grindr either did not follow-up or identified as gay or bi, reflecting Grindr's target population. I received more dick pics and sexual solicitations than serious inquiries on the app. Through Grindr, I connected with Mark and Jon.

website where users could post them. This was in response to the U.S. Congress passing the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act, which made websites liable for any users that utilized them for sex trafficking or sex work. Critics pointed out that this bill actually makes sex trafficking worse by pushing it underground, where it is more difficult to trace, and renders sex work more dangerous by taking control away from independent sex workers. Regardless, dozens of websites such as Craigslist immediately deleted forums where users could seek anonymous sex.

In any case, during each interview I used an interview guide. Inquiries included the following:

Describe your sexual identity. How do you feel like your sexual identity describes you better than other sexual identities, if you think it does?

Describe yourself in terms of masculinity and femininity.

Thinking about your sexuality and how you see yourself as a man, how is it like living in a rural area?

How was it like growing up in a rural area?

Describe the kind of guy you prefer to meet up with.

The interview guide changed several times as I added new questions to further explore the most analytically interesting themes. Most questions, however, were on the interview guide for the entire project. Even for those I added, most participants who did not answer that specific question addressed the topic when discussing other questions. For instance, even before I asked a question specifically about pornography, most participants discussed that at some point during the interview. Similarly, while I added more targeted questions about masculinity during later versions of the interview guide, participants detailed their masculinity before I included those questions. Additionally,

because the interviews were semi-structured, I asked questions to follow-up on interesting responses even if I did not have a specific question on the interview guide asking about the topic at hand. I reordered and rephrased questions to make the interview less formal, which allowed me to follow-up on leads. Interviews lasted approximately one-and-a-half hours. I uploaded all transcripts to the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to apply codes, and repeated this as I coded additional transcripts and created new codes. I created all codes during analysis rather than at the beginning of the study. As the sole researcher, I created and applied all codes. In line with Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw's (1995) suggestions, I began analyzing transcripts with open coding and later transitioned to focused coding for the most analytically important themes. My approach was similar to that of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967) in that I gathered and analyzed data without an existing theoretical framework. I did, however, use prior literature to help construct the interview guide (e.g., Ward 2008). Further, as Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) explain, I developed ideas after collecting and analyzing data, and this shaped how I collected further data (e.g., by adding new interview questions). This approach is common in qualitative research.

As Table 1 shows, the sample was racially homogenous, but diverse in terms of attraction. One participant identified as "Hispanic" and another identified as mixed race, but said most people perceive him as white. About 65% were mostly or only attracted to *women*, approximately 2/3 were in their 50s or older, and a majority were currently married. Participants had a variety of educational and occupational backgrounds, but most were middle class. Almost all had some college or more, and a majority had a bachelor's or higher. The sample was more highly educated than the general population.

While all were secretive about their male sexual encounters, all also identified as straight—both to themselves and to others.

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

Characteristic	Frequency	Approximate Percent of Sample
<b>Attraction:</b>		
Only men	2	3.3%
Mostly men	6	10%
About equally men and women	13	43.3%
Mostly women	32	53.3%
Only women	7	11.7%
<b>Age:</b>		
Adult teenager	1	1.7%
20s	4	6.7%
30s	9	15%
40s	6	10%
50s	19	31.7%
60s	14	23.3%
70s	7	11.7%
<b>Relationship status with women:</b>		
Married	34	56.7%
Non-marital relationship	5	8.3%
Divorced or widowed, currently single	9	15%
Single, never married	12	20%
<b>Education:</b>		
Less than high school	1	1.7%
High school	3	5%
Some college, an associate's, or trade school	23	38.3%
Bachelor's	16	26.7%
Master's	12	20%
Ph.D. or professional degree	5	8.3%
<b>Race/ethnicity:</b>		
White	58	96.7%
Latino	1	1.7%
Mixed race	1	1.7%

### *Why These Rural Spaces?*

Because there are distinct rural spaces, this project specifically examines U.S.-based rural spaces in the Midwest, Pacific Northwest, Mountain West, and far northern California.<sup>4</sup> These areas share demographic white majorities (United States Census

<sup>4</sup> There is a vast expanse of rural, far northern California several hours north of San Francisco. Many residents see themselves as culturally distinct from the rest of California, and some even call for secession to form the State of Jefferson. See for instance Branson-Potts (2018) and Wilson (2017).



Bureau 2016) and social conservatism, as indicated by voting patterns: most rural areas with white majorities vote Republican (Bump 2014; Economist 2016), and there is a negative relationship between county population density and percent of voters choosing Republicans (Economist 2016). Given that the Republican Party is moving further right on social issues, Republican voting patterns indicate social conservatism more broadly. I argue that rural areas from which I recruited men have similar hierarchies of desired sexual partners due to their similar racial histories, demography (all are majority white), and social conservatism. This in turn, I argue, shapes sexual partnering practices, which reinforces identification with straightness and masculinity.

The areas I examine were historically part of the mythic American frontier. They have not experienced large-scale migrations of Latinx populations to the extent that some rural areas of the South (e.g., Texas) and parts of the rural Southwest have. They also do not have large populations of rural black people stemming from legacies of slavery, which while existing in many areas was concentrated in the South (see also Jakubek and Wood 2018). While people of color are present in the rural spaces I examine, they are a minority. The shared racial histories the areas I examine include (1) genocide and forced removal of Native peoples and (2) massive influxes of white populations that are the demographic majority to this day. The US as a nation has similarities in how racisms operate. For instance, the US is structured in part as a settler colonial society given that it appropriated Native lands and resources (Glenn 2015). Nonetheless, particular regions also have specific racial histories that may affect participant narratives (Pulido 2006). The South's legacy of black slavery and the Southwest's appropriation of Mexican lands and migration of Latinx populations are examples. Hence, I limited recruitment to rural

spaces that share fairly similar characteristics because I do *not* analyze regional differences in how participants identify and express their gender and sexual identity. Building on operating definitions of the US Office of Management and Budget (OMB 2010), I concentrated recruitment efforts in non-metropolitan areas in my target regions: those with fewer than 50,000 residents. I do not argue that the areas I examine have identical racial histories—only that they share enough similarities to warrant examining them together to analyze intersections of rurality and whiteness with gender and sexuality.

Relatedly, this project's rural focus is not meant to suggest all rural areas are homogenous or polar opposites of urban areas. Lichter and Brown (2011:566) note that with “the blurring of rural-urban spatial and social boundaries” due to economic, social, and political interdependence, it is problematic to conceptualize rural and urban spaces as binary opposites or even as existing along a continuum. Indeed, “America today contains many rural Americas, all of which are linked in fundamental but different ways with urban America and big cities” (568). Nonetheless, given that research indicates expressions of sexuality and gender often differ in rural areas as compared to urban, it is fruitful to examine similar rural spaces. In total, 41 participants were raised in rural areas or cities under 50,000 in population not near major urban centers, and 44 lived in these types of areas at the time of the interview. Almost all either grew up in a rural area or currently lived in one. Only 4 were raised in large metropolitan areas over 500,000 in population and currently lived in a similar context; they saw my Craigslist recruitment ad when traveling.

### *Scope of the Study*

This project expands on, and differs from, the few studies of straight MSM to date. Departing from Ward's (2015) study of urban and military men through content analysis, I examine rural men through their own narratives. I also expand on Carrillo and Hoffman's (2016; 2018) online interview study, which emphasizes how "heteroflexible" men perceive their identities. They do not analyze the gender identities of straight MSM, nor do they analyze race or rurality, as this project does.

The interview methods in this project complement the content analyses and online interview methods of previous studies. Counter-intuitively, straight-identified men who post ads looking for same-sex sex may be distinct from those who engage in it. As Robinson and Moskowitz (2013:562) found, many straight-identified men view Internet cruising, posting, and emailing as "self-contained erotic acts" that do not transition into offline behavior. Online ad representations may inaccurately reflect the narratives of straight MSM and will at best capture only snippets of their lives, given that researchers cannot ask them questions. Content analysis of Craigslist ads is well situated to analyze how straight MSM discursively construct straightness and gender in online settings, but not necessarily to understand their own narratives. The in-person and phone interviews I utilized also help to address the disadvantages of online interviews, which Carrillo and Hoffman (2016; 2018) used. Online interviews guarantee anonymity and may increase participation, but they also discourage the sharing of nuanced data due to the time it takes participants to type answers.

Through interviews with 60 men, this study is the first to examine how rural, white, straight MSM themselves understand their gender and sexuality. This project uses

intersectional analysis to understand the relationships between straightness, masculinity, whiteness, and rurality. Answering my research questions allows me to analyze *straight culture*, which is the foundational theme of this project.

This project also explores tensions between normativity and queerness. These men identify as straight and masculine, and align themselves with normativity. None of this is queer. The existence of straight MSM, however, shows that (1) there is diversity within heterosexuality and (2) common sexual identities often do not represent lived experiences of sexuality. Above all, they show that (3) *many individuals identify as straight to align themselves with a straight sexual culture*. This helps to “queer” understandings of sexuality, including heterosexuality. Thus, these men are not queer, but their experiences do help challenge mainstream understandings of sexuality and gender.

Chapter II explores how *alignment with rural straight culture is the key reason for the men’s identification as straight and masculine*. “Straight” was an identity that encompassed participants’ alignment with mainstream heterosexual institutions, such as marriage, and straight communities, to which they and most people they knew belonged. Collectively, these institutions and communities comprise straight culture. Participants considered straightness an identity, a way of life, and/or a community. Having sex with men was largely irrelevant to their sexual identity and how they understood their masculinity. Talking to them highlights how straightness is cultivated in a variety of institutions and contexts, and in numerous ways. Key institutions included childhood family of origin; religion; school and/or youth sports; and adult families, especially partnerships with women. Because participants grew up in and/or lived in white-majority rural areas, the rural straight culture to which they felt connected was by definition white.

This shaped their desires for other white men. Hooking up with other white men a majority of the time helped them to more easily interpret their sex as compatible with heterosexuality and masculinity. By talking to straight MSM, we can analyze their experiences with straight culture and how they came to identify as straight. By using an intersectional lens, we can best understand how and why this happens. While most men do not have sex with other men, talking to those who do *shows how and why many men come to identify as straight and masculine.*

Chapter III details why participants had sex with men. Over half reported primary or exclusive sexual attractions to *women*. Even for those with substantial attractions to men, there were four other main reasons for having sex with men. First, many experienced their sexual orientation in complex ways. For instance, several reported experiencing sexual *desires* for men, and for penises specifically, but not sexual *attractions* to men. Second, many experienced changes to their bodies or sexual desires—or reported that their wives did—over the life course. About three-quarters experienced their sexual attractions to men grow stronger or appear when they had previously not been attracted to men. Further, about one-third reported that their women partners lost interest in sex. Both reasons encouraged them to seek sex with other men. Thus, *male sexuality can be flexible across the life course.* Third, many felt that men were better or more appropriate casual sexual partners than women. In particular, many participants felt that women were naturally emotional and thus fit for long-term partnerships but not for casual sex, since they may become too attached. Men, on the other hand, they perceived as naturally able to separate sex from emotion, and thus ideal for hookups. Many also felt that women were too difficult to find for hookups, which may reflect a sexual double

standard that stigmatizes women, but not men, who have casual sex (Hamilton and Armstrong 2009). Thus, *beliefs about purportedly natural gender differences, which together uphold the alleged naturalness of heterosexuality as an identity and an institution, actually encouraged sex between men*. Lastly, many participants used sex with men to build connections with other men, experience human touch, and relieve the pressures of masculinity. Thus, participants used sex to address needs for connection and touch in a normatively masculine way.

Chapter IV details the way participants had sex with other men—*bud-sex*—in ways that protected their heterosexuality and masculinity. Bud-sex involves three main components: hooking up with guys like themselves; interpreting male-male sex as largely unthreatening to their masculinity, heterosexuality, or marriage; and having secretive, non-romantic sex. All these components normalized their practices and rendered them compatible with straight identification and masculinity. Bud-sex—and the particular gender and sexual meanings embedded within it—both reflected and reinforced their alignment with straight culture. Participant narratives show that people interpret similar sexual acts differently depending on how they identify.

Chapter V explores the participants' relationships with other men. Participants preferred to romantically partner with women, not men, so they engaged in emotion work to regulate their feelings for men. This is not to say that participants cut off all feelings of emotion for men. There were four main types of relationships participants formed with other men. First were casual, sex-only relationships that involved feelings of convenience, comfort, and/or safety, but were not intimate. Second were genuine friendships that happened to involve sex. Many participants integrated these friends into

the social fabric of their lives, spending time with them outside of sexual encounters or even having couple dinner dates with their women partners. Third were deeply intimate friendships that were non-romantic, but nonetheless involved a deeper connection than the word “friend” can capture. Many involved sexual exclusivity, extensive time commitments, and/or unprotected sex. Lastly, some participants like Larry experienced temporary romance. Regardless of relationship type, all participants regulated their emotions for other men to ensure they did not affect any other parts of their life. By carefully regulating their emotions, participants reaffirmed their masculinity and heterosexuality, and thus their alignment with rural straight culture. Nonetheless, their narratives underscore how straight men can and do form emotional and even romantic relationships with other men. Social context shapes how men regulate their emotions.

Sexual identification reflects alignment with certain cultures and communities over others. Straight MSM are not closeted gay or bisexual men. They are straight men that like having sex with men every once in a while. Most were fairly nonchalant about their sex with men, and did not consider it meaningful to their identity. They had sex with men in a particular way—bud-sex—that reinforced and reflected their alignment with rural white straight culture. Their enjoyment of straight culture—and the institutions, communities, and ways of life attached to it—was central to their identification as straight and masculine.

## CHAPTER II

### STRAIGHT CULTURE

Maybe only a few times I've ever mentioned this, I can't exactly in a politically correct world. I think there's a definite disconnect between gay and homosexual. There's the homosexual community, which isn't a community, there's the homosexual proclivity, and then the gay community. It's like you can be an athlete without being a jock. And you can be homosexual without being gay, or into all of it. It just becomes so politically charged now. (Connor, 43, rural Oregon)

Men can be—and are—straight even as they enjoy sex with men. Men who enjoy sex with other men have “homosexual proclivities,” according to Connor, but do not have to be gay. As he later elaborated, “I consider gay a little different than homosexual.” Val shared similar sentiments when explaining why he identifies as straight: “for me it's a matter of the all around time that I spend with individuals that I like. [It is] more than just the sexual aspects of a person. And I like being with women, particularly my wife.” Why would men who have sex with men identify as straight?

The short answer is *straight culture*. “Straight” was an identity that encompassed participants’ alignment with mainstream heterosexual institutions, such as marriage, and straight communities, to which they and most people they knew belonged. Collectively, these institutions and communities comprise straight culture. Participants considered straightness an identity, a way of life, and/or a community. Having sex with men was largely irrelevant to their identity. Their narratives show that people interpret similar sexual acts differently depending on how they identify. Specifically, straight-identified MSM interpret their sexual practices in different ways than men who identify as gay or bisexual. Participants’ alignment with heterosexual culture reinforced their straight identity. Straightness is not just an identity: *it is an entire social world*.



Social structures and social forces encourage *all* men to identify as straight and masculine, regardless of their sexual practices. Of course not all straight men have sex with men. Those who do, however, have thoughtfully considered why they identify as straight. Talking to them highlights how straightness is cultivated in a variety of institutions and contexts, and in numerous ways. Key institutions include childhood family of origin; religion; school and/or youth sports; and adult families they formed by partnering to women and often having children. By talking to straight MSM, we can understand their experiences with straight culture and how this influenced them to identify as straight.

The straight culture to which participants felt attached was geographically bound, gendered, and raced. Participants aligned themselves with a *rural* straight culture. The institutions that affected their lives were rural, as were the communities they felt reflected their values. Most felt that part of a rural straight man's life was being a husband and/or father, and found great meaning in this. Their identification with masculinity went hand-in-hand with their identification as straight. This is because rural heterosexual culture is tightly connected to normative gender practices (see also Leap 2017). Their identification as straight was deeply tied to their sense of themselves as masculine. Most saw themselves as straight, masculine, *rural* men. This reflects their alignment with institutions and communities that comprise rural straight culture. Lastly, almost all of the participants grew up in and/or currently lived in white-majority rural areas. The rural straight culture to which they felt connected was a *white* rural straight culture, and this affected their identities and their desires. All but two participants were white, and their networks and communities were majority white. As such, whiteness was "normal" and

standard in their contexts. By hooking up with other white men a majority of the time, participants were more easily able to interpret sex with men as compatible with straightness and masculinity—and more broadly, with rural white straight culture.

Most felt like gay men and culture were too feminine, urban, and/or incompatible with conventional marriage or family formation. Thus, what they perceived as gay culture contrasted with their identity in three main ways. Only a minority of participants expressed overt homophobia. Of course, institutional heterosexism affected how participants saw themselves and others, just as it affects almost everyone. Most institutions encourage gender normativity and heterosexuality. This is different than saying participants identified as straight solely because of homophobia, however, because none did. All had other reasons for identifying as straight. Most identified as straight not because they hated gay men, but because they *enjoyed straight culture*.

### *Learning Masculinity and Heterosexuality in Rural Straight Culture*

Participants enjoyed what many termed a “straight lifestyle.” As Peter detailed, sexual identity is a “way for groups of people to kind of come together or separate, and so I feel like straight, as a community, straight sexual identity is where I feel aligned.” He further explained that,

Personally I don't really believe that anyone is just like completely heterosexual or completely homosexual, I think everybody's got some place on the spectrum of that... Like I very comfortably wear that label of being a straight white man, because kind of like culturally and socially that's what makes the most sense for me. I'm not interested in being like, trying to get like my environment to acknowledge me as some different new fluid sex thing.

As with Connor, Peter felt connected to a straight community and culture. His attractions and sex with men did not detract from his feelings of belonging with straight culture.

Most participants did not use the term “straight culture,” though they did discuss straight and gay lifestyles as proxies for straight and gay culture. Their narratives show that they did indeed align themselves with straight culture, even if they did not call it that.

In four main institutions, participants *learned how to be straight and masculine*. Sexuality and gender are structured in numerous ways, within multiple institutions, and in many contexts. Childhood family of origin, religion, childhood youth activities and schooling, and/or marriage and adult families greatly shaped how participants understood their heterosexuality and masculinity. *These institutions were pillars of rural straight culture*. Not coincidentally, these institutions are often racially segregated in rural America. Thus, these institutions helped participants identify with a rural *white* straight culture, as I will detail more later in this Chapter. Participants did not identify as straight simply because they did not want to identify as gay. Instead, they found great value in what they considered a rural straight man’s life, especially marriage and/or childrearing. Little research explores how men *become* straight and masculine and *maintain* these identities. These participants provide insight into what social forces encourage *all* men to align with masculinity and heterosexuality.

Participants expressed satisfaction and comfort with straight culture. Their rural institutions reinforced their identification as straight and masculine. All of these institutions overlap, but I discuss them separately for analytical clarity. Identifying as something other than straight, or being more feminine, would have been difficult because of homophobic stigma. It is inaccurate to say that these men identify as straight simply because of internalized homophobia, however, given the numerous ways they aligned themselves with straight culture. Instead, we can see the effects of compulsive

heterosexuality (Pascoe 2011; see also Rich 1980), which exists in most US institutions and contexts. Most people consider heterosexuality normal and standard, and most institutions, contexts, and interactions reflect this. Compulsive heterosexuality encouraged participants' identification with heterosexuality and masculinity. Indeed, as Todd shared, he married his former wife in part "because it was just what was supposed to be done at that point, I guess." He felt this way even as he said he enjoyed a "straight lifestyle." As with most facets of social life, we see the effects of both personal choice and structure (Bourdieu 1985; 1989; Sallaz and Zaviska 2007). Participants enjoyed straight culture and aligned themselves with it in various ways (personal choice). The institutions and contexts they were a part of in childhood and adulthood shaped their preferences and the options available to them (structure). Both personal choice and social structure affected the other, and both shaped the participants' identification with straightness and masculinity.

### *Childhood family of origin*

Most parenting practices are heteronormative, implicitly or explicitly encouraging straight identification. This is the case with both mothers (Martin 2009) and fathers (Solebello and Elliott 2011). Even parents that support LGBTQ civil rights often unintentionally—or knowingly—raise their children to be straight and gender normative. Thus, families often reinforce compulsory heterosexuality. Families are also key for teaching children how to behave as "proper" men or women. Several participants explained how their families encouraged their identification with straightness and

normative masculinity, in both overt and subtle ways. They learned that being straight and masculine was just what men did. It was normal and expected.

Several participants remembered their family overtly encouraging heterosexuality and masculinity, often due to conservative religious teachings. Mike, for instance, stated that “we were taught that no matter what, that you're a straight male, and you're supposed to get married, you're supposed to do all these things, so I've always identified with that because that's how I was raised.” Mark experienced a similar dynamic when he told his uncle, who was a preacher, about his desires for other men: “Like my uncle said when I was about 18, he said you get married, you have a family, and all those desires will leave you, and so I got married and had a family... nothing was accepted except being straight.” Families expected heterosexuality, regardless of participants’ attractions or desires. Jordan, similarly, shared that “for lack of a better way to put it, that's the way I was raised. It was taboo to even talk about anything else, you're going to hell, certainly, if you're gay, and I don't know, so it had a lot to do with upbringing.” In addition to severe stigma, some participants even feared violence from family members. As Ryan explained,

Back in those times you were a fag or were a queer. And there's no way I was going to pigeonhole myself as that, I wasn't that way. If I was my big brother would beat me up. I had three other brothers and a very masculine dad, and no way I was one of those, OK? I think you have to have a certain amount of confidence and maturity to start accepting things about yourself. And, for a long time there was no way, I wasn't one of those people.

While few participants echoed Ryan’s fear of violence, they nonetheless made clear that families influenced how they understood their sexuality as straight and gender as masculine.

Participants also internalized more subtle messages from their family, such that identifying as straight and masculine felt natural. As Dan described,

I think that because of the way I was brought up, and the activities that I participated in were more of a masculine, they were more slotted masculine or feminine. There wasn't a question of what, it wasn't a question of like or dislike, it was just what guys did. And I enjoyed them. It has nothing to do with not enjoying them or just doing them because, I did enjoy them.

Dan recognized the influence of his rural upbringing on his masculine identity and practices, even as he enjoyed them. Similarly, Will noted that “the straight life is according to everything you learned when you're growing up. [A] man and a woman get married, have children, you have a house, and it doesn't always work out that way, but that for me is what a straight life [is].” Chad, relatedly, described that “I think I followed the role model of all the people around me, and just did what I was supposed to do.”

Participants often learned subtle lessons from families about what constituted normal families and lives, and internalized this. Many participants, like Zach, described fathers as particularly important for understanding themselves as men:

Growing up at home, our dad was always, he was the leader of the house and he kept things going and he kept everyone in line. But yet, he spent time taking us to activities that a man would want to go to, and he spent a lot of time with us. We were around our mother a lot, but we did things with him and I think that helped contribute to the masculinity. I think a lot of people today, the reason why they're feminine or they lean that way is maybe because they're from a broken home unfortunately or they never had a father as a role model. They only had the mother and that's what they saw. And that's how they relate.

Zach described the influence of his father in positive terms, and felt that men were feminine if they did not have a strong father figure. He appreciated what his father did when growing up. Todd also described his father positively:

Probably just seeing my dad I guess, being the way that he is, my dad's been dead for years but knowing what he did. He was very construction oriented, worked a lot, did what he had to do, just a symbol of masculinity right there. Plus uncles

and cousins and stuff like that who were more manly, they were in the service and stuff like that, I think it was a little more of a idol role like that.

Zach and Todd both identified their fathers as key figures in how they see themselves as masculine today, and appreciated what their fathers did. Others described the influence of their fathers or other male family members downright negatively. As Paul shared,

I had a very dominant father, and he was older when I was born so he was actually more the age I am with my grandkids, so he's more like my grandfather, so he was very much this is women's work, this is men's work. It was the traditional male-female roles of 100 years ago, and that's the way he raised me. And so it took me some getting used to, to realize that in modern society, especially if you're not gonna live in a rural area, those things don't hold true anymore. It took me a while to figure out that just because you cook the meal and do the dishes, doesn't mean you're not masculine.

For Paul, and several other participants, fathers served as an example of what *not* to do as men. Paul at first saw gendered household divisions of labor as natural, in part due to his father, but later changed his perspective. Regardless of whether participants framed families in positive, negative, or neutral terms, however, family members influenced how they understood and expressed their sexuality and gender. Family members were key agents encouraging—in various ways and to different extents—straightness and masculinity.

### *Religion*

It is unsurprising that religion influenced many participants to identify as straight. Conservative religious beliefs are strongly tied to homophobia, and rural residents tend to be more religious than urban ones. About a third of the sample indicated religion as a key reason for seeing themselves as straight. While religion holds great importance for how many Evangelical men perceive their sexuality and masculinity (Diefendorf 2015), this is

not the case for all men. Religion might have more influence over participants' straight identification and masculinity than it first appears, however. Some ideals rooted in religion have become so widespread that most people perceive them as secular (Gerber 2011). Many participants' perceptions of themselves as straight are likely tied, to at least some extent, to heteronormative ideals rooted in religious discourse. Ideals about marrying women and having children—again, partly rooted in religion—also reinforce masculinity for men. Indeed, marital relationships often rely on gendered understandings of what husbands and wives are expected to do. So, whether or not participants explicitly identified religion as a factor in how they perceived their sexuality and masculinity, it did likely influence them. Regardless, a subset of participants discussed *learning* how to be straight in religious families, organized religious institutions, and/or religious social contexts. Of them, most identified as straight to avoid shame, guilt, or sin associated with gayness. Religion was one of the few topics where some participants expressed considerable conflict about their practices. While only about a third indicated that religion shaped their straight identification, it was highly influential for them.

Numerous participants noted the continuing influence of childhood religious context for identifying as straight. They learned that gayness was inappropriate and even immoral. When discussing attractions to men, Will explained that, “yeah, you try not to act on them. I mean, the way you were raised. Of course, I was raised in a Baptist home, and I think that had a lot to do with it. What you're taught is, you grow up, you marry, you have children, that's the life you live. There's no relations with a male.” Mark, who was raised in a deeply religious family in rural Mississippi, learned that gayness was one of the worst possible sins:



I think until I was probably 14 or 15 I never even heard the term homosexual. Faggot, queer, yeah. But gay hadn't been invented yet, didn't know the word homosexual. The attitude that I picked up from people, [I] probably never even had a conversation, was that it was like the most awful thing you could do. Like one step below murder or something, open the chute and send you straight to hell.

Mark internalized religious guilt and shame, as well as messages from his family that he should marry and raise children. Harrison shared similar religious concerns, in part because he attended a “strict” Catholic school as a child, where “there is nothing else but straight.” As he further explained, “I was raised Roman Catholic and the Nobertines were very strict, and so I truly believe I'm in a state of mortal sin, and eventually I intend just to go to confession, be in a state of grace, and don't see guys anymore.” Harrison experienced substantial guilt and conflict about his practices. For Harrison and several other participants, childhood religious beliefs—instilled in them by family and religious institutions—continued to influence how they perceived themselves. Shame and fear from their religious teachings were major reasons for identifying as straight.

Relatedly, several participants detailed religious struggles with their sexual behavior, facilitating their identification with straightness. Guilt helped push them toward heterosexuality. Cain experienced substantial struggles with religion:

I told you I had deep religious convictions as well. [It is] just like alcoholism runs in certain families, I don't think it makes you an alcoholic. Because alcoholism runs in your family, I do think there's an element of choice. It may very well be, I don't think it's really firmly established that there's a gay gene or whatever, but, even if that is true, I think there is still choice. It's somewhat disappointing to me that I don't have greater self-control... I think it's related to my belief system, religious belief system. Which does not view this behavior, these acts as something a Christian should do.

Cain's religious beliefs were in large part responsible for his immense feelings of guilt and shame. These encouraged him to continue identify as straight. He was one of the most conflicted participants. Ryan, similarly, noted that he sought therapy to help

reconcile his internal struggle over having sex with men: “I think back to when I was in therapy... The doctor said 'if you're gonna survive this, you're gonna have to come out as gay.' And I couldn't do it, in fact I was planning my suicide because I couldn't do it. So there's gotta be a straight side of me that wants that. That's been my struggle over the years.” Ryan felt so much shame at the thought of identifying as gay that he considered suicide. He also loved his wife and did not want to leave her. Notably, Ryan was much more conflicted about the thought of *identifying as gay* than *having sex with men*. Like many participants, Ryan was able to reconcile his sexual practices with his religious beliefs more easily than the thought of identifying as gay. Similarly, James shared that “currently I would I say that I believe the gay life is something I would consider more of a struggle for me, something I don't want to live my life in. I would say that's just based off of my current Christian beliefs.” Brian also noted religious struggles:

You asked a little about church, and I think of myself [as] real religious. And to be honest with you, the biggest struggle that I have, sometimes I'm sittin' in church and I'm thinking 'have I committed a carnal sin?' Obviously I have, by allowing a guy to suck me off. I see jerkin off with other guys as pretty much not a big thing, but when you get into Old Testament dogma, Leviticus 20:13, specifically, [laughs], it's pretty condemning. A man shall not lie with a man as he does with a woman, that kind of thing. And so that causes a great deal of guilt, and possibly because of that guilt I have not gone beyond [receiving oral sex] in any realm. So religion does play a factor in this whole thing. It is what it is, I'm pretty good at dealin' with reality, so.

Brian felt considerable guilt at having sex with men, which was one reason he continued to identify as straight. For these participants, religion was a clear reason for identifying as straight and feeling guilt over having sex with men. Similarly, George noted that sex with men made him feel “dirty”:

[Religion] has affected me, I think that's really fuel on the fire of the guilt I was talkin' about. I'm the kind of person that after an encounter I feel really dirty and I want to just shower and get cleaned up. Go read the Bible or something, because I

feel that it's a sin to do what I'm doing. I know that whether it's adultery or not, it's still a sin to do what I'm doing. But at the same time, I know that I'm not perfect and nobody is perfect, so I guess I can kind of justify it as, I only do what I can do in life. If I go to hell because of this I go to hell because of it. I would hope that I've done enough good, what I've done in my life being in the military and being in law enforcement and all the stuff that I've done to help others. I would hope that that would offset it, maybe? [laughs]

Internalized homophobia related to religion, and the guilt associated with it, was a factor in why many participants identified as straight. These beliefs affected how they perceived sex with men and their identification as straight.

In sum, religion influenced many participants to live what they considered a straight life. Others shared a more nuanced view, indicating that religion did not greatly affect their identification. Notably, not all participants were religious and many rejected religion. Some participants were raised in a religious context and reported not being very religious as an adult. As Eli said, "I'm a recovering Catholic." Others reported never being very religious. So, while religion was an important factor for many participants, it was only one social force of many.

#### *School or youth activities, including youth sports*

Sociologists have long noted the importance of schooling and sporting institutions to how men perceive their masculinity. Pascoe (2011), for instance, shows that male peer interactions in high school regulate boys' expressions of masculinity and heterosexuality. Gendered sexual socialization in preschools (Gansen 2017), peer interactions in elementary school (Myers and Raymond 2010), and formal and informal curricula in educational institutions (Pascoe and Silva forthcoming) also encourage heterosexuality and gender normativity. Sports, too, have become a key way for men to construct

masculinity and heterosexuality (Messner 1992). While many people consider hunting and fishing sports, participants discussed them as hobbies. As such, I detail hunting and fishing in later sections about rural culture, rather than here.

Several participants shared that disinterest or lack of youth sporting skill in school negatively affected how they saw themselves as men. Given the links participants drew between masculinity and heterosexuality, this threat to their masculinity likely encouraged stronger identification with heterosexuality. Harrison, for instance, noted that he “was always the last one picked for the team... [and] I was a Scout dropout, [was] forced to play Little League.” In part because he was different from other boys in this way, Harrison felt that “it was tough” to grow up in his community. Similarly, Mitch shared that not enjoying sports posed difficulties for him:

A lot of people always identified me as different because I wasn't into sports and stuff like that. I was never really accepted on those levels. [I was] a little different. I was always just more sensitive, and I cared about different things. I cared about art, and music, and movies, and stuff like that. Versus sports.

Growing up in a conservative community and not enjoying sports was a challenge to how Mitch saw himself as a man. Similarly, Adam experienced a congenital heart issue that affected his ability to participate in sports. This greatly shaped his childhood:

I didn't have a really good childhood. I had some physical issues, which I was often teased for. Sometimes it seemed like I did better having female friends than some male friends. And believe it or not, 6 weeks ago I found out what my issue was. It was actually something I was born with, a bicuspid heart valve. And so I didn't excel at sports or anything like that. I did swim on swim team and I did play football in high school, but physically there were a lot of things I couldn't do... So it always left me somewhat weak and unable to do some of the things that the other guys did. It kind of dominated who I became. So I didn't always, I couldn't always keep up with the pack, let's put it that way.

Adam's congenital heart condition, which affected his ability to engage in physical activity, made him feel weak and inadequate. This negatively affected how he saw

himself as a man. As with Adam, who reported being teased, Paul explained that peers bullied him in school:

Well in school I was always, I guess, the bullied child. So I didn't ever have a lot of friends, I guess, and I think that's affected me as an adult because I still don't have a lot of friends. But I think I've just kind of, because of all of the bullying I went through in school, I think I just kind of decided it wasn't worth it havin' friends if you had to deal with that kind of stuff.

Childhood bullying was so traumatic that Paul mostly stopped trying to make friends and relied on his wife and family for companionship. This underscores how aligning himself closer to heterosexuality helped him compensate for threats to his masculinity, and in particular bullying from other men. Jordan, similarly, shared that his experiences in childhood greatly affected him today. Not excelling in childhood sports, in a rural context that valued sporting, made him feel less masculine: "I was raised on a farm, I was raised in a small community. So, in a small community, a small school, you were masculine if you were good at sports. And there were times I did not feel masculine because I wasn't that interested in sports." Vince also shared that childhood sports were a source of challenges to his masculinity, but he came to construct his masculinity in other ways:

Well back in the day I had a brother who was on the football and the basketball team. I played in the band. I would get shit from my football star uncles that I was big and I should play football, I could plug holes, and I was just not the slightest bit interested in that. So I equated that with being less masculine than they are. My brother coerced me into goin' out for little league. I hated it, I absolutely hated it. He talked me into goin' out for football, I hated that more. And lasted a couple of weeks. Is a guy that plays football more masculine than a guy that plays in the band? I think the general population would say yeah. But I quickly learned to not give a shit.

Disinterest in sports was a challenge during his childhood, especially due to pressures from family members. Vince later rejected sports entirely, however, and constructed

masculinity in other ways. For several participants, schools—and often, sports in school—challenged how they constructed masculinity.

Other participants shared more positive experiences in childhood sports, which helped them bolster their masculinity. When explaining childhood influences to masculinity, Eli explained that, “I played football in school, all the way through my high school years.” Football in particular was key to how many participants saw themselves as men. Joey, relatedly, noted that “growing up in the Midwest I was [a] typical jock in high school, athlete and so on.” He further explained the importance of sports for how he saw himself as a man:

That was very traditional, very structured role. Guys in schools were athletes and girls were cheerleaders or in the band and so on. It was really just the early days of women's sports and Title IX and so on, so really delineated gender roles, no doubt... Hunting would be one and sports would be another big one, no doubt. I was captain of my basketball team, good baseball player and so on, so athletics was important to my gender identification as well, to be an athlete.

Excelling in sports was a key aspect of how Joey, and several other participants, saw themselves as men. Their experiences with sports helped them construct masculinity in a fairly straightforward way.

Several participants considered their experiences with school and sports important for their masculinity. For participants who experienced school- or sports-related issues, such as bullying, heterosexual identification helped them feel like men. Male peer interactions in school and participating in sports affect how men construct masculinity, so difficulties with either (or both) meant straight identification was particularly important for constructing masculinity. Straight identification, in other words, helped some participants relieve threats to their masculinity. Given the links participants drew between

masculinity and heterosexuality, threats to the former encouraged them to double-down on their straightness.

### *Adult families*

For a majority of participants, having children and/or forming partnerships with women were central to their straight and masculine identities. The institutions of family and marriage are particularly important in rural areas, which are often more conservative than cities. This helps to explain why so many participants raised this topic when describing their straight identification and masculinity. Participants placed great meaning on being a husband, provider, and/or father. They identified as straight in large part because of what they valued—family—rather than what they did not value, such as gay culture.

Many participants viewed families, especially being a provider, as central to how they understood themselves as men. Chris indicated that, “I feel I'm fairly masculine, I see myself as masculine. Like I say I'm in charge of my work, in charge of the family. I try to guide my children in the right direction once in a while.” Being “in charge” involved “just like finances and the house and preparing things, we live on a ranch so we got chores that have to be done. I do that as much as I can and then I go to work and then the wife has to take those over. I do what I can.” To Chris, having a family meant taking control and giving direction. Similarly, Joey shared that being a man meant being a leader:

I think first thing would be in some ways to be a leader, within reason a leader within marriage, to provide a sense of security. A sense my wife would have that I know what I'm doin' and I'm makin' the right decision. And certainly to be a father, I have two grown children, that's extremely important to me. I'm probably

a better father than I have been a husband in some ways, and I take pride in being a good father.

For Joey and others, key to being a man was taking responsibility for the family's wellbeing. They did not evaluate this with dread, but took pride in it. In Jared's words, this involved being "head of the house, head of the family, breadwinner, provider, both materialistic and spiritualistic, emotional provider." Taking care of—and in some matters exerting control over—women partners and children was key to how many participants saw themselves as men.

Beyond a sense of responsibility, many participants expressed satisfaction about forming families. When answering a question about his masculinity, George noted that "I work quite a bit, and whenever I'm off work I'm spending time with my family, and son." Similarly, Harrison expressed that, "being a good dad, I think that's the biggest one, the most masculine is being a good father. I admire that." Paul also shared that men "make sure your family is taken care of" and felt most masculine "when I'm with my family, my wife and my kids." Participants were socialized to partner with women and have children, and these relationships subsequently became a key—and valued—part of how they saw themselves as men.

Participants perceived partnering with women and having children as central to being straight and masculine. Cain described that sex with men was fun, but that "the experiences of marriage and having a family, that's also been rewarding. And long lasting, [it] has benefits. Whereas the other is so fleeting... They're both exciting in their own way, and they have different thrills." Cain had the best of all worlds by marrying a woman, having several children, and secretly having sex with men. Kevin indicated a similar feeling, noting that "I've always lived a straight life." He continued:



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

For Kevin and others, sex with men was fun but not all that meaningful to their lives.

Some, like Kevin, considered it a vice. Their families were greatly important to them, and they were a major reason for identifying as straight and seeing themselves as masculine.

Many participants equated marriage to a woman—and often childrearing—with straightness. Ryan shared that “I desired having a wife and a family and I sought that lifestyle.” He reflected on his wife, children, and grandchildren, explaining that “I would think that I'm most comfortable as straight or I probably would have changed to a gay lifestyle several years ago. So to me a straight lifestyle is being a family man and acting that way.” When defining what it meant to be straight, Adam noted simply, “basically [being in] a heterosexual relationship.” Chris echoed this, saying he is straight “I guess because I'm married and I've got children. And I do love my wife.” Similarly, Peter and Brian indicated that, “I would say that I don't really identify as bisexual because I am in a heterosexual relationship” (Peter) and “I consider myself straight. Married over 30 years and like women” (Brian). Relatedly, Jared shared that “I think that [straight] describes me best because I am married, have children, adult, grown children, but I also have urges to be with men.” For many participants, being straight was a way of life—indicated most clearly in relationships with women and perhaps having children. Being in a relationship with a woman meant being not gay, nor even bisexual.

Relatedly, many participants discussed straightness as something they *did* most of the time, especially as it involved maintaining partnerships with women. This was key

to being straight. As Chad noted, “I have a girlfriend who I love very much and, so we have a relationship, I function as a straight person, mostly, 99% of the time, I would say.” On a related note, Seamus shared that he is straight “probably because I’m married to a woman, and I only play around with guys every once in a while.” Val echoed this, saying that “I’m primarily heterosexual. Definitely. I’m married and primarily have sex with women, but now and then I do enjoy sex with other men.” Harrison framed his identification as straight in terms of “lifestyle” choices: “I’m married, I have kids, I’m not into that gay lifestyle.” Harrison found this important because of what he described as a natural compatibility between men and women: “In fact the only force of nature, this is my own theory, that can settle men is a woman. If you’re not married, you’re going to go out there and go to Vegas once a year, play poker, stay up late, drink. But if you’re married, you work, you settle down, you save.” Straight identification referred not so much to participants’ sexual attractions or behavior, but to their chosen way of living: having relationships with women partners and/or raising children.

Participants who had not yet married also described how wanting to partner with women—but not men—was a marker of straightness. James explained that straight described him better than other identities because it reflected “the degree to which I want to get married and have a wife. That’s kind of how I see myself in the future.” Similarly, Jose noted that, “I definitely would love to have a wife and kids one day, but I guess I’m just one of those late bloomers and it’s just taking me now into my 30s to realize and kind of figure out what I want [laughs].”

In sum, most participants considered partnerships with women, especially marriage and perhaps children, as key to their straight identity and masculinity. To them,

straightness was a way of living and relating to the world. It had little to do with attractions or sexual behavior. In the context of a partnership with a woman, occasionally having sex with men was entirely compatible with straightness and masculinity.

*Happiness in their relationships to women:* None of the 39 married participants or the 5 in non-marital relationships with women planned to leave their women partners. Most expressed satisfaction with their relationships. The main concerns they shared were fairly common among couples, like those regarding money management or personal time. By far the most common issue participants reported was women partners not having a high enough sex drive. Nonetheless, they were not miserable in their relationships with women, and did not long for a monogamous romantic relationship with a man. Participants overwhelmingly enjoyed their intimate relationships with women. Their narratives reveal the genuine pleasure they felt by aligning themselves with straight culture.

Participants expressed deep care for their women partners. Sometimes they compared this to their feelings for men to reinforce their distinction, as Ryan did: “I saw her [my wife] and I could just feel my, my heart did melt. And I’ve never had a man do that to me. Because I’ll tell you what, if it hit me with a man like it did with my wife, it would probably bust my marriage up, that’s how much I love her.” Ryan experienced such love for his wife that he could not imagine leaving her, and did not anticipate feeling similar affection toward another man. Similarly, Mike shared about his wife that “she’s the one that kept me here. Kept me grounded and things like that or I would’ve been

probably crazy doin' [something], probably dead in a grave somewhere now." Mike had no plans to leave her:

I would never do that, like I said, to my wife or anything like that... I would never do that to hurt her. Ever. Or my kids, my daughters. I've raised them very, very nice and they're very well adjusted women now. I just wouldn't do that... that relationship is always gonna be there. I don't think that'll ever go away... I do love my wife. Still do.

Mike cared for his wife and did not want to divorce her. He considered partnering with a man if she died or divorced him, but not in any other situation. He valued their relationship and the children they raised together. Relatedly, while Travis was frustrated that his wife was no longer interested in sex, he shared that "I've got friends that say why in the hell do you stay married to her. Well I guess it's because I love her and other than the fact that we don't have a sexual relationship we do have a good relationship." Despite his frustration with their sex life, Travis nonetheless loved his wife and did not wish to leave her.

Several participants discussed their love for their woman partner, and at the same time discussed how much they enjoyed their children and family unit as well. Like many participants, Aaron wanted to remain marriage in part because of his family:

In our society I think things are easier if there's an intact male and female parental situation. I think that is part of the reason I stay in my marriage. My wife and I do get along very well outside of the bedroom. But that would be the biggest devastation I could see in my life, would be changing the family dynamic in my family. I have good kids, I have good grandkids, I have good in-laws, I have good kids in-law, I dearly love my wife's family, and basically still getting along with my wife is why I'm so discreet. I come from a broken home, I know sometimes it has to happen, but [for] my family specifically it would be devastating to change it.

Having experienced his parents divorce, Aaron did not want his children to endure a similar situation. He felt that healthy children necessitated the presence of a mother and

father. Several other participants indicated similar feelings about not wanting to break up their family unit.

Numerous participants detailed intimate aspects of their marriages. Eli described he and his wife as “best friends” and explained that “we do so much together... we share the same hobbies, we share the same interests.” Despite concerns about their sex life, Eli regarded his wife as his best friend and did not want to divorce her. Neil also enjoyed his relationship with his wife, saying “we get to spend quite a bit of time together because there's not a lot of other people around,” and that “I like that she's intelligent, she can carry on a good conversation, she's a good cook, a good mother to our kids.” Being in a rural area meant he was able to spend more time with her. As he said about his location, it is “very rural. I've got to drive about 80 miles to the closest Walmart.” Val similarly shared that “we definitely love each other and so forth and as we get older that's the overriding important thing.” Main reasons why included, “she's just very supportive no matter what the situation is, does everything she can to be as helpful as she can, she's very lovely with my parents and with our kids and so forth. She would prefer to spend time with me than be alone or be with other people.” Many participants greatly enjoyed the time they spent with their women partners.

Overall, most participants in relationships with women described their relationships with satisfaction. This reflected their alignment with rural straight culture, which prioritizes marriage and family formation. They were not unhappy and looking for an opening to leave their women partners and enter into a male-male relationship. Instead, they enjoyed their marriages or partnerships with women. They also happened to enjoy sex with men, too.

### *Masculinity and Rural Straight Culture*

Gender is a social structure, composed of hierarchically organized masculinities that together legitimate and create inequalities between men and women and among men (Connell 1987; 2005). Masculinity is also an ongoing interpersonal process through which actions inconsistent with hegemonic masculinity are policed by friends, family members, acquaintances, and others, and often suppressed in homosocial spaces (Bird 1996). In the U.S., how men understand and express masculinity has changed greatly over the last two centuries (Bederman 1996; Kimmel 2006). Heterosexuality remains key to normative masculinity today (Connell 1987; Pascoe 2011), and more conservative beliefs about masculinity are strongly associated with greater homophobic attitudes (Keiller 2010). Men express more homophobic attitudes on average than women (see Bridges and Pascoe 2016 for a review). Men are especially likely to do so when they feel their masculinity is threatened (Falomir-Pichastor and Mugny 2009; Munsch and Gruys 2018; O'Connor, Ford, and Banos 2017; Weaver and Vescio 2015; Willer et al. 2013). Thus, it is likely that participants identified as straight—and aligned themselves with rural straight culture—in part to preserve their masculinity.

Rurality was a key part of how many participants saw themselves as men. Over half used rural hobbies, occupations, or other descriptions to describe their masculinity. Some struggled to articulate this. Pat, for instance, nonchalantly answered a question about his masculinity by saying, “right now I'm standing outside on the front porch of the hunting cabin in this rural setting taking a leak.” Their narratives demonstrate that

masculinity is a key part of rural straight culture. Central to the participants' narratives is a country-masculine habitus (Desmond 2006).

Many participants noted that growing up in a rural area deeply affected their sense of masculinity. Like Chris and Sean said, "I think it's put into us as a child over here. Boys are boys and girls are girls" (Chris) and "the masculinity part is a no brainer, because like I said it's rural, very conservative, very redneck" (Sean). Lance similarly shared that he was surrounded by masculine men: "it's a farming, ranching, community, as well as a lot of oil field work, so the guys out here are pretty hardcore, masculine types." David echoed this, noting that both the rural area and the time period affected his masculinity:

It was the way of life, that was the way you were. You were either that way or you were strange. I got to tell you, I think it would be really, really hard, particularly for a gay boy to grow up in rural America, I think it would be tough. I think that's why a lot get out as soon as they can. It's better now than it was. Boy, when I was a teenager that was just a real no-no... My dad [worked in an outdoor job] and all his friends were officers and wardens and law enforcement and military, Boy Scouts, it was just the masculine side of life, everything we did. Yeah, just didn't have any femininity in my life at all.

Participants who were raised in rural areas, like David, noted numerous influences that facilitated identification with masculinity, including family members and other role models. None identified any influences that provided socially acceptable options for femininity or open gayness or bisexuality.

Childhood work in rural areas also encouraged identification with masculinity. Matt emphasized farm work: "My uncles had farms, so you'd be out there helpin' bale hay and stuff like that... we'd go over there for a weekend and help out. Things like that... you're always out doing manual labor, so you think of yourself as masculine."

Tom, similarly, said that growing up in a rural area encouraged alignment with

masculinity “because I was on the farm, and I’ve always done masculine things.” Jordan too expressed that “I am a workaholic, I was born and raised on a farm, and we worked hard all of our lives... we had to get up at 4 in the morning and go change water before we went to school.” Donald related to this, saying “I’m quite masculine... I grew up in a ranching family and I enjoyed all the jobs that I did during the summer, farming and looking after cattle and horses. I enjoyed that a lot.” Bob remembered both work and play as a key part of his rural boyhood:

These two brothers I hung out with, we was real close friends, still are to this day. The older one was out chasin’ pussy and the younger one was all about me and him huntin’ and fishin’ and workin’ on old trucks, helpin’ our parents on the farm, things like that. Well, helpin’ parents on the farm meant that we had more time together to do other things [like sex]. [laughs]

Participants like Bob did not view growing up in a rural area as a time of dreadful hard work. Rather, they recalled it fondly. Childhood work in farming and ranching was a part of how they saw themselves as men.

Several participants also shared rural coming-of-age moments when they described their masculinity. As Donald shared,

Being manly was important to me. I wanted the men to accept me even though I was only a 13 year-old boy, [to know] that I could do a man's work. And I was asked to do men's work [laughs] and I did. I even got to go to the bar when I was 12 for the first time. At the bar I had a little shot glass of beer. Not whiskey, but beer... It was all just in good humor.

Donald recalled drinking with men for the first time as an indication that they accepted him as a man. Joey also shared a masculine, rural coming-of-age ritual: “it’s a cliché almost, but it would be getting my first deer. Killing my first deer, when I was 13. That’s a real right of passage here in the Midwest, hunting, for men, and I’m happy to say increasingly for young women.” For several participants, including Donald and Joey,



rurality was key for how they began understanding themselves as men when they were young teenagers.

Many participants described their masculinity using rural hobbies like hunting, fishing, shooting, or other outdoor activities. These were hobbies that defined them as *rural men*. Jack for instance explained that his “outdoor-oriented” rural area shaped his masculinity:

I consider myself pretty masculine. Appearance wise pretty masculine, the things I do, interests, all masculine, I like to shoot, I like to hunt... those pretty much consume my life... I don't wear suits, and ties, and khakis and all that. I wear boots, and I've always been an outdoors person, worked in the outdoors, and just have always identified with that, as pretty masculine.

Outdoor activities, including hunting and shooting, were key to how he understood himself as a man. Jack also noted that hunting opportunities were a major reason why he lived in eastern Oregon. He also distinguished himself from urban men, who wear “suits and ties.” Pat also described outdoor hobbies as key to his masculinity:

Yes, very masculine. I drive a pickup. I'm sorry I gave up all my hobbies, did that when I bought the little place I live at. But yeah, I like guns, I'm not good at hunting, but I like to go up in the woods and sit there and drink my half pint of Jack Daniels and act like I am hunting. I'd say very masculine. I like baseball... I like masculine activities, I like to shoot weapons, rifles and pistols, drive a pickup, I like to go for walks in woods, love to own the ground, own farm ground, worked in the oil patch... I'd describe myself, yes, as masculine, there's no question about it.

Pat had no doubt he was masculine, and used elements of rurality to describe this. Indeed, he even met men for sex at his hunting cabin. His rural masculinity structured his hobbies, former occupations, everyday activities, and even the locations he had sex with men. Joey also explained that he is “a man’s man” who likes to “hunt and fish,” and that he too hooks up with men in his hunting cabin: “I have a little deer hunting cabin, and he was in the area and we arranged well ahead of time, and he came and met me at my deer

hunting cabin.” Most participants did not have hunting cabins, but regardless saw rurality as central to how they perceived their masculinity. Jon shared that “I’m a big, tall, in-shape, good-lookin’, straight guy that likes to hunt, fish, camp, and I raise cattle for a living. I’m pretty much masculine.” Connor noted that other people would perceive him as “probably slightly above average masculinity” because “I go off-roading in the forest, and I go hunting and fishing, and I work as a biologist and all my clothes are made for wear and tear.” Guns, hunting, and fishing were key to how many participants perceived their masculinity. This helps explain why Marcus explained that “I portray myself as very masculine. [I] wear jeans and boots and camouflage hats and sleeveless t-shirts, drive a truck, and like to shoot stuff.” Travis also explained that “I like to shoot and hunt, and I’m a big hiker, and I think those are guy kind of things. I don’t go to museums and I don’t go to quartet music concerts, I don’t spend time at art galleries and wine and cheese socials [laughs].” Travis distinguished his rural hobbies from what he thought urban men enjoyed. Chris echoed his enjoyment of rural activities:

I just like doin’ masculine things as much as I can, like hunting and fishing. And back in the days I did skiing, snow-mobiling, things like that. Since then I’ve had a couple heart attacks which kinda slowed me down and the ability to be able to do things like that. It takes me more time to do ‘em today than what I did 20 years ago... I do have no restrictions, I just do what I have to do and when I have to stop I have to stop. I’ve had total recoveries from both of them. One time back when I was in my 40s my son was involved in scouting, and we took a 50 mile hike in the mountains, talk about a gorgeous area of Montana to hike through. We went about 10 miles a day and when we found a creek we’d stop and camp by the creek for the night.

Chris enjoyed rural hobbies, including sharing them with his son. Even as his activities changed with age, his memories of rural hobbies in years past helped to define himself as a man. Val shared that he thought of “hunting, fishing, hiking, camping, [and] boating”

when considering his masculinity. Interestingly, he also noted that these activities bolstered his masculinity despite having sex with men:

I guess when I'm lookin' for a guy to have sex with or havin' sex with a guy, I don't really spend time thinking about whether I'm feeling feminine or masculine. I feel masculine and I just concentrate on how to make the pleasure more intense and so forth, how to make it last. And overall maybe because we're doing a lot of masculine type things, hunting, fishing, camping, that sort of thing, I totally feel masculine.

Rural hobbies helped Val feel confident in his masculinity, despite his sex with men. His rural masculinity provided him comfort that he remained straight and masculine, despite enjoying male-male sex. Overall, rural hobbies were key to how many participants understood themselves as masculine men.

Some participants also used rural occupations to describe their masculinity, mirroring how many recalled childhood work in farming and ranching as key to their masculinity. Kevin explained that “I've always done blue-collar type work, I live in a rural area, I've had a farm, I'm a farmer, farmed all my life.” Chris also shared that he currently lives on a ranch and that “I've worked on ‘em my whole life off and on, farms and ranches.” Neil described his masculinity using rural activities, especially ranching:

[I am] kind of a cowboy I guess. I have some cattle so I work, I have a ranch, so a lot of my hobbies are associated with that. I spend a lot of time outside, fix the fence, I like to watch football, I like to listen to country music, I like to listen to rock music, I drive a truck, I shoot guns, I drink beer, drink whiskey. I like to go fishing... I guess I just kind of grew up doin', workin' on the ranch, doin' stuff outside, playin' football, playin' basketball. Sports and workin' I guess.

Neil's ranching occupation was central to how he saw himself as a man, and even described himself as a cowboy. He also explained that he feels most masculine “probably when I'm workin' cattle. That's a real man's job, it takes a lot of strength, it takes a lot of endurance.” Rurality was so much a part of Neil's life that he was even unaware of it at

times. For instance, he sent me a picture of his bare chest, and the background was a cornfield.

For a majority of the participants, rurality was key to how they understood themselves as men. This reinforces how *normative masculinity is a key aspect of rural straight culture*. Rural childhoods; outdoor hobbies such as hunting, fishing, or shooting; and rural occupations like farming and ranching were major parts of how many perceived their masculinity.

### *Straightness and masculinity*

Given that male masculinity is a key aspect of rural straight culture, many participants viewed male heterosexuality and masculinity as overlapping considerably. All participants identified as straight (or some variation of straight) and all also described themselves as masculine. This echoes the ways in which heterosexual identification and the gender binary reinforce one another (Schilt and Westbrook 2009).

By publicly acting masculine and avoiding acting feminine—which many participants associated with gay men—participants reinforced their straightness. For example, Jeff shared that “the way I think about myself is straight. Part of that is because I guess I was always raised to believe that homosexuals were flamboyant, wild, pink hair, over-sexualized, etc. And I’m masculine, straight acting, and entirely turned off by cross dressers, etc.” Jon, similarly, identified as straight “because I’m a masculine guy that does guy things. Every once in a while I have sex with guys, but [not often].” Relatedly, Matt shared “I act straight” and clarified by explaining, “I appear normal. Straight, I guess, whatever you want to call it.” Bob colorfully described his masculinity when explaining

why he identified as straight: “pardon the language, but I’m not one of those burst into flames every time you walk out of the house kinda guys [laughs].” Many participants, like Bob, described themselves as *behaving* in ways that were straight. They described that similarly to Dan: “It’s my overall everyday persona, that’s who I am most or all day.” Being straight and being masculine were strongly connected. Acting straight meant acting masculine.

Similarly, many participants described their heterosexual identification or alignment with heterosexual culture when explaining their masculinity. As David explained, “I think it’s my physical makeup, I’m an alpha male, I’m attracted to women.” Describing related sentiments, Rand and Jared noted that they feel most masculine when “engaged in wild sex with a woman while on top” (Rand) and “When I’m with a woman and I can satisfy her and then satisfy myself. If there’s some emotion tied to it that’s even better, if there’s a connection. That’s when I say when I feel like a man the most” (Jared). Several participants felt that sex with women helped to define themselves as a man. Participants’ sense of themselves as straight was key to how they understood their masculinity, and vice versa.

Relatedly, numerous men described their masculinity by stating that most people would not believe they have sex with men. As Travis noted, “There’s nothing effeminate about me. [laughs] I’m a man’s man. I look it, I talk it, I work it, I am just a guy. Nobody would suspect that I have this other ulterior lifestyle because there is nothing that I have done, or show, or do. I mean, I’m just a guy.” Being a “guy” meant acting masculine and presenting himself as straight. Similarly, George explained that,

I believe that I’m masculine enough to where nobody knows at all. I’ve seen Youtube videos of a guy coming out, or a video of a guy coming out and he says

when I came out everybody said ‘oh yeah, it's about time you came out, we already knew.’ I don't think anybody knows about me. Because I dress masculine, I'm a guy that goes out shootin' guns and I'm a masculine guy, but I have desires beyond some masculine activities.

George believed that he was so masculine no one would believe he could have sex with men. Indeed, he found the thought amusing, as did many other participants. In line with others, Rand found it absurd that someone might know he has sex with men: “I’m a carpenter, a guy’s guy, nobody would ever imagine that I do this [laughs].”

In sum, many participants explicitly or implicitly tied their heterosexual identification with their masculinity. They did this even as they knew that feminine straight men and masculine gay men existed. Many also expressed varying degrees of effemiphobia: dislike of male femininity. Their sense of themselves as men was tied to their masculinity and heterosexuality.

### *Heterosexuality in rural America*

Rural areas encouraged masculinity and heterosexuality simultaneously. Participant narratives show how *heterosexuality is central to rural culture*. As Jose said, “you don't really see any gay couples or men and women that live together that people know around here, as compared to the city where you would see more of that. Here where I'm at there's not much of a, I guess you could say gay scene around here. It's mainly straight.” Donald also shared that “there wasn't anybody in observation to show me that there was any alternative. Sort of an innocence.” Echoing this, Joshua noted that “I don't know, when I was growing up there wasn't really a lot of gay or bisexual people that at least identified that way. But mostly I mean just in general seemed like more masculine people than feminine as far as men.” Many participants were not even aware of

alternatives for quite some time. As Richard said when referring to the initial thought of sex with men, “I was a farm boy straight off the farm.” Relatedly, Kevin noted, “I grew up in an area where that wasn't an option, in a time and area both.” Underscoring the link between rural masculinity and heterosexuality, Tom indicated that he identified as straight “probably because of all the masculine things I’ve done in my life,” such as farm work as a child. While LGBTQ people live in rural areas, as Mary Gray (2009) details in her study of LGBTQ youth, they are often less visible than rural residents who are straight and gender normative.

Participants described their rural environments as deeply heteronormative, with heterosexuality “distilled in a lot of the kids here” (Chris). Rural contexts encouraged masculinity and heterosexuality through various socialization influences, including through the threat of violence. As Mike shared,

This is what's called the Bible Belt. So you have, back then, a lot of people that was very stern religiously, politically, socially... very stern against this kind of stuff. You didn't want to get that name out because you would be ridiculed or whatever it might be, shunned... because it was not a popular way to be. Or beat up, even, for that matter, because there was a lot of people that would just knock the tar out of you if they thought that you was gay, or doing anything like that. Not even gay, just doing anything like that.

Mike noted the possibility of violence for maintaining male heterosexuality and masculinity. Even without violence, heteronormativity was widespread. David explained that “it's really a straight life, rurally, it just is. There's no leniency.” Brett elaborated, saying “I think ruralness in South Dakota probably means conservative. I think people in this area are maybe a little more close minded, not so accepting of being bisexual even, not to mention gay, so you tend to hide, you suppress your feelings more so than a city.” George, too, explained that “a lot of peer pressure growing up was to date other girls, and

I think that's kind of the route I went." Neil described his living area a "straight world": "Definitely a straight world, definitely, everybody just expects that you're gonna get a girlfriend, drink beer, get married, and have kids. And if you don't then you're that crazy weird guy who lives at the corner of town or somethin'." Heterosexuality was part of the foundation of participants' rural communities. Relatedly, Jordan explained that being openly gay or bisexual "would be horrible because everybody knows everything in those communities... you would be scrutinized pretty rigidly." Heteronormativity and gender normativity were the fabric of their rural contexts, in part because of tight community ties that encouraged conformity.

Several participants acknowledged heteronormativity in their rural environments, but framed that in positive terms. As Bob shared,

As a kid growin' up, I really liked it, I think the whole experience growin' up in a rural community made me a lot better person than I probably could have been had I been say growin' up in metropolitan St. Louis or Kansas City. [In those cities] there was more exposure and the larger the population is, the more exposure. Had I grown up in the city, I probably would have been the biggest flamin' homo you ever seen. But growin' up in a rural community, it was help your buddy out kind of thing, nobody's lookin', and it was all kept under wraps, and nobody knew anything. But I thoroughly enjoyed growin' up in a rural environment.

Bob enjoyed growing up in a rural area because it helped ensure he would be straight.

The main drawback to living in a rural area, he said, were "the fuckin' mosquitoes."

Similarly, Larry explained that he identified as straight because of his living area:

Primarily just the culture that I live in. I am in rural Wyoming... it's kind of a small town, my family's pretty well known in the town and it's just not a community or a state that's very diverse as far as different sexualities, different ways of life. I would say straight because that best suits our cultural norms around here.

While Larry grew up in an urban area, he moved to rural Wyoming because he enjoyed its culture. As he detailed,



I kinda weighed all my options and this is conducive to what I wanted as far as what I valued in my life, so I moved to a smaller place, rural, like a hometown type of place... I like so many things. I like the simplicity, the pace of life is slower. I like that it's very high on the value on relationship, friendship, family is very high around here.

Larry and Bob both appreciated the widespread encouragement to be straight and masculine in their rural social contexts. Indeed, they noted that they may have been openly gay or bisexual in a larger city—and were happy they were not.

For most participants, growing up in and/or currently living in a rural area encouraged their alignment with heterosexuality and masculinity. These were encouraged in both subtle and overt ways, and through multiple institutions and individuals in their social context. Heterosexuality and male masculinity were central to rural culture. Few to no alternatives were visible, and male femininity or open gayness/bisexuality seemed difficult or even impossible. While rurality posed some challenges, it also provided many benefits. These included easy access to activities like hunting, fishing, camping, and hiking; a slower pace of life; connection to nearby family members; close-knit communities; and privacy. The positive attributes compensated for the difficulty of finding male sexual partners and the need for extreme secrecy. Rurality was not something participants endured; it was something they enjoyed.

### *Gay Culture*

Feelings of belonging in straight culture went hand-in-hand with feelings of *not* belonging in gay culture.<sup>5</sup> Participants were not seeking an opportunity to come out as gay or bisexual. They were satisfied identifying—and expressing themselves—as straight and masculine. Collectively, participants felt that gay lifestyles and men contrasted with

---

<sup>5</sup> Few participants discussed bisexual lifestyles or cultures.

their sense of self in three main ways. First, they viewed gay men as feminine and themselves as masculine. Second, they thought that being gay meant having or desiring a male romantic partner, which they did not. Third, they perceived gay lifestyles in *urban* terms: going to clubs, partying, living in gay neighborhoods, and/or associating mostly with other gay people. Gay urban activities contrasted with their preferred rural life, which they perceived as both straight and masculine. Thus, their perception of gay lifestyles contrasted with three key elements of their identity: their masculinity; their relationships with women, which they saw as central to being straight; and their appreciation of rural life. They felt that embracing a gay “lifestyle” would mean sacrificing much of what they valued, including marriage and family. Their attitudes about gay men and gay culture, of course, are a product of their socialization in straight culture. It is entirely possible to be masculine, married (to a man) and raise biological children, and live in a rural area. Yet they did not consider this as a possibility for themselves. In any case, such lives were not compatible with rural straight culture, which they valued.

Participants felt that male-male romanticism was a hallmark of gayness. Avoiding romantic attachments to men reinforced their straightness. For instance, Jack explained that “I don't necessarily relate to the gay scene. I don't want to be with a man, as far as a relationship or anything like that. I just have these secretive desires for a male body... I have no feelings like that [love] at all, and never have, for any man that I've been with, I guess. So it's just strictly physical with me.” Jack had no desires to partner with a man, which reinforced his straightness. Relatedly, Otto shared that “for a long, long time I thought I would probably be described as bisexual. But the more I read and understand,

and I don't know, associate[d] myself more with identified bisexuals, that's not me, man. I'm not lookin' for a partner other than for sex.” Ian, relatedly, explained that he identified as straight through a “process of elimination”:

I think [I] would explain it as a process of elimination. I don't consider myself gay, I don't consider myself bi, I don't envision myself entering into a romantic relationship with a man, I only envision that happening with a woman. I don't consider myself gay, and for bi, my definition of bi is that you could enter into a romantic relationship with either male or female, and that doesn't describe myself either. Thus, I conclude I'm straight.

A key reason Ian considered himself straight is because he did not want to romantically partner with a man. Others felt the same way. As Ryan noted, “there are people like me that don't want to give up my straight lifestyle but sure like getting' together with a guy once in a while.” Straight lifestyles were entirely compatible with occasional sex with men. On a related note, Zach noted that none of his sexual relationships with men turned romantic because of his disinterest in living life as gay:

I think maybe down deep inside I might have wanted [some] to be [romantic]. But because I don't consider myself deep into the gay lifestyle or anything, no. But that's not to say that I may not have wanted it. I may have, I think I thought about it once or twice but didn't pursue it because I didn't really identify with that. I didn't identify with it that way.

Zach's narrative reinforces that feelings of romanticism are deeply affected by social context and sexual identification. He did not want to associate with a gay identity or “lifestyle,” so he never allowed any relationships with men to turn romantic. Peter further stated that “I could never I don't think be in a relationship with a man, because there's something about being with a woman that's just sort of has my whole interest.” Aaron also felt this way: “I would have no interest in living with a man in a partnered relationship. My interest as far as a living partner would be only a woman.” No participants planned to romantically partner with another man and most sought to avoid

romantic attachments to men. Chapter V shows that some participants did experience love for another man, and many felt deep friendship towards some male sexual partners. All took steps to ensure that this did not affect other parts of their life, however. Avoiding romantic attachments to men or tightly bounding them separated participants from a gay “lifestyle.” It also aligned them with a straight “lifestyle” and culture, which participants felt fit them best.

Several participants highlighted their perceived association between urbanity and gayness. As Harrison described, a gay lifestyle involved “perhaps having a partner, going to clubs, being on Grindr all of the time, and Craigslist. Just perhaps living in a community, and having most of your social circle be gay.” Jeff, similarly, noted that “I have one gay cousin, and he's feminine and flamboyant, the whole out and proud thing, lives in San Francisco, and I wasn't interested in that at all. And so I guess I identified with the remainder of my heterosexual family.” Despite the visibility of a family member being feminine, openly gay, and enjoying city life, Jeff had no interest in pursuing that option for himself. Relatedly, Connor explained that “if you say gay, that also goes into the lifestyle and culture a little bit more. Bi or straight just means a little culturally gay, you wouldn't be as into the party scene or the bars or anything like that.” Todd noted that “[with] a gay lifestyle there's more interaction with more people. It sounds silly [laughs], but there's more parties, there's more things going on, and more places to go and do different things than a straight life.” He later elaborated, saying that “it's like an exciting lifestyle, and not boring,” and that with a “gay lifestyle you're a little more apt to let your hair down and do wild, crazy things.” Similarly, Brandon explained that part of why he identifies as straight and prefers women is because he does not enjoy “a party type

lifestyle,” given that “part of what I do is public service type of a job, and obviously I am not into that lifestyle because of what I do professionally and the values that I have.” By distancing themselves from the gay partying “lifestyle”— which exists mostly in urban areas—several participants reinforced their identification as *rural* straight, masculine men.

### *Homophobia*

Participants expressed varying degrees of homophobia. Overall, 58 of 60 participants answered questions about same-sex marriage and childrearing. Of them, 43 (73%) expressed support or neutrality toward same-sex marriage, and 31 (53%) expressed support or neutrality about same-sex couples raising children. Many of the rest raised concerns about impacts on children, or stated that same-sex couples should only raise children if adopting or fostering. While some participants opposed equal rights or had mixed feelings, a majority supported them. Many reported *liberal* attitudes about LGBTQ rights, and several expressed dismay at homophobia in their communities. All participants, however, considered a gay or bisexual identity—and life—as incompatible with how they saw themselves. A distinct minority were homophobic, whereas the rest simply did not view gayness or open bisexuality as something that was right for them. There are several, often subtle types of homophobia (Doan, Loehr, and Miller 2014), which men express more than women (Bridges and Pascoe 2016). Many participants expressed various, subtle types of homophobia (e.g., preferring straight or bisexual men for hookups). Identifying as straight was due to much more than homophobia, however. It was due to their alignment with straight culture.

Some participants were on the far-right end of the political spectrum and opposed equal rights. Cain was one example of this: As he said, “I just really hate that lifestyle. I really don't enjoy so much of the stuff that surrounds that.” Cain was highly religious and conservative, and opposed the “gay lifestyle” on those grounds. He found identifying as gay, acting feminine, and engaging in acts associated with gay culture as unappealing. A subset of the sample agreed that gay culture and relationships were problematic, and that gay people should not have civil rights.

Other participants expressed subtle homophobia, but in different ways than men like Cain. Rand for instance explained that seeing two men share physical intimacy was jarring:

I've seen it [gay porn] a couple times, and it really turns me off. I've even tried to watch it a little bit to see if it stimulated me. It's really one of the ironies [laughs] that I live with. Even when I see two men kissing on a TV show or something, it's like ew, that's weird. And yet under certain circumstances I can do that, so it's a weird sort of dissociation.

Rand occasionally had sex with men, but did not enjoy seeing two men being physically intimate—whether in porn or on a TV show. His knee-jerk reaction was to disassociate with gay people and acts, apart from his own occasional sexual encounters with men. This is homophobic, but much milder than Cain's. Several participants shared similar statements.

Most participants distanced themselves from gay culture, but not necessarily in ways that were homophobic. Neil explained that his everyday life made identification with straightness and masculinity commonsense for him:

Day to day, the majority of the time I just kinda live in that straight world, straight persona. No one would ever think that I would be curious on the other side I guess, I don't think anyway. Kind of a macho guy, I guess. I like my job, and

where I live, the rural area, [it is] very conservative, so it's kind of a straight world that I live in.

For Neil and other participants, occasional sex with men did not detract from feelings of belonging with straight culture. This is also why Ryan identified as straight. Ryan noted that he used to see a therapist, hoping to resolve his same-sex attractions: “I was in therapy for two years about 10 years ago, trying to change that part of me, which was unsuccessful. My choice at the time, when I was in therapy, was either to pursue a gay lifestyle or to remain straight, and I could not identify as a gay man.” Ryan did not see himself as gay at all, and even considered suicide rather than come out as gay. Despite his sex with men, he saw himself as straight and wanted to continue identifying and living as such. All participants felt that gayness was not an appropriate match for them, but most felt this way for reasons other than bigotry.

Other participants expressed very liberal beliefs about LGBTQ rights. Will, for example, visited the Castro in San Francisco to see what life was like living as an openly gay or bisexual man. Nonetheless, when I asked him his identity, he stated “if someone's honest about it I guess you would have to say bisexual, but I don't really live that life.” He then clarified that he identifies as a “straight-leaning bisexual,” and shared this over email: “I don't know if that makes any sense to you, I think, living a straight life is a much easier one than it would be to live a gay life. Maybe that's part of the reason, I am who I am.” Will acknowledged that societal homophobia may affect how he sees himself and lives his life. That, however, did not change how he aligned himself with straight culture. Indeed, Will shared that “I'm not waving a rainbow colored flag around anywhere, I can tell you that much.” Eli was even more liberal than Will, and even performed several same-sex wedding ceremonies for friends and worked in political

activism related to LGBTQ rights. Regardless of their level of homophobia, participants considered a straight and masculine identity the best fit for them.

### *Whiteness and Rurality*

The majority of participants sexually partnered with and/or preferred to partner with other white men. By having sex with men like themselves—masculine, not-gay, and white—participants were able to reinterpret sex with men as fairly inconsequential to their sexual and gender identities. Their nonchalance about identifying as straight yet having sex with men would have been at risk had they chosen men who seemed out of place in their everyday white and straight contexts. Their rural straight culture was a rural *white* straight culture. Identifying as white, living in white-majority rural areas, and having sex mostly with other white men helped aid identification with masculinity and heterosexuality, despite having sex with men. Desiring and having sex with white men both reflected and reinforced their alignment with rural white straight culture.

### *The white spatial imaginary*

While the white spatial imaginary shapes the participants' relationship to racialized space, I argue that it also shapes the participants' white habitus. Participants' tastes and preferences (part of their white habitus) were racialized, reflecting their racialized relationships with and in space. Their segregated social and residential environments facilitated racialized desires for other white men. By hooking up with white men a majority of the time—who participants saw as normal in their everyday contexts—participants were able to more easily interpret their practices as compatible with



heterosexuality and masculinity. A key aspect of the white spatial imaginary is homogeneity in environments, which I argue also structures the participants' practices. While the white spatial imaginary involves several interrelated elements, homogeneity is the element most directly connected to the participants' racialized sexual practices.

In total 35 participants stated preferences for white men, but 55 said that a majority of their partners were white. Over half of the sample articulated racial preferences, despite the tendency for white people to often explain racialized sexual or romantic partnering as nonracial. This suggests the extent to which their whiteness was deeply intertwined with their sense of themselves as straight and masculine. The gap between stated preferences and actual partnering practices is likely due to more than demographic odds (i.e., living in white-majority areas). It may reflect greater desires for white men even among participants who did not report them.

Many participants who stated preferences for white men had difficulty articulating why they did, as is typical when white people describe racialized preferences or practices (Bonilla-Silva 2003). Those who did reported that it was more normal for them to partner with white men, expressed that they felt more desire for men who looked and acted similar to themselves, or noted that they could better relate to other white men. Erik, for instance, noted that he prefers white men because "I guess it's what I would feel most comfortable around." As Kevin shared too, "I would say I prefer white guys, but I mean I'm not a racist or anything like that... I guess because I'm white, and I guess you'd say more normal for me to be with white guys." Ian relatedly shared that he prefers white men "because I'm Caucasian, and I can better relate to him as a result." For many

participants, men racially similar to themselves were ideal. Similarly, Paul noted that white men are more culturally similar to himself:

Well he'd be white like myself. Just because that's my hangup with race. Just because he'd be more like me. Culturally, whereas I see other races as not coming from the same culture and having differences there, I guess I think of, when I talk about other races I think of immigrants who are just, still not into the American culture all the way yet. Western European type culture is what I would be looking for, or American.

Paul preferred white men because he saw them as culturally similar, though he never specified what cultural differences he found uncomfortable with men of color. This sense of greater comfort with white men was evident in Todd's narrative as well. Todd preferred white men because "sometimes I think it should only be white-white" and "I feel more comfortable with a white guy, even though black guys, I've been with a few and they're nice." Joey suggested that men of color would complicate his ability to render his same-sex encounters as compatible with straightness and masculinity: "I think it's just an embedded comfort level, I think a man of a different race would add sort of another complexity, another layer, and kind of to the psychology of it, and ideally it's just a focus on physicality, I don't want to deal with any extra psychology involved." Joey was unique in that he acknowledged the relationship between his racialized sexual practices and his ability to interpret sex with men as compatible with straightness and masculinity. By hooking up with men who looked like they were part of rural white straight culture, participants were more easily able to interpret their sex as inconsequential to their identities.

A racialized hierarchy of sexual partners was also evident in most participants' sexual preferences or sexual histories, reinforcing the desire for many participants to hook up with men similar to themselves. Indeed, Latino and/or Asian men were often the

next most desired or common sexual partners. This theme is clear when David described his racial preferences:

White. Let me put it this way. Probably not a black guy, he could be Latin, possibly even Asian, but I would lean primarily towards white guys that are more or less like me, Anglo-European, that kind of thing. [I am] not turned off by others, and I would probably have sex with a black guy under certain circumstances, [but] I'd have to know him real well, have known him for a while, it wouldn't be like a "let's meet and do somethin." They wouldn't be my first choice, at least not the first time.

David articulated a preference for men like himself, and much more constrained circumstances for hooking up with black men. Similarly, Joe noted, "I'm white. The closer to white you get, Hispanic's OK, but the further from me you get, if you get to the black side, I'm just not in. My mind does not compute on that spectrum." The more racially similar potential hookup partners were to participants, the more interested many participants were to hook up with them.

Several participants used racial/ethnic stereotypes to explain why they preferred to hook up with white men. Tom shared that, "sometimes Mexicans can be a little impatient and a little rude, has been what I've found." Connor, relatedly, reported preferences for white men but said that "maybe just for the fantasy of it I'd have a black guy if it was a professional, serious type of black guy, not a hip-hop guy. I mean if you're gonna make up a fantasy... then might as well go for the exotic thing." To Connor, professional black men were both rare and exotic. Connor used cultural stereotypes to explain why he does not hook up with black men, something Aaron did too:

I wouldn't have anything against a black person as a sexual partner just on the basis of their blackness... it's not because of race, it's more because of lifestyle or attitude or whatever. It's like I don't understand things like the thug lifestyle, that sort of thing. But just specifically I wouldn't have anything against any race as far as an ideal sexual partner, it's just kind of, if there was absolutely nothing in common outside of the bedroom, that's where it wouldn't fit my ideal partner.

To Aaron, men of color had little in common with white men; they were too enmeshed in the “thug lifestyle.” This stereotypical description of men of color also draws on specifically urban archetypes, making men of color seem even less appealing to him. Similarly, Lance noted that men of color were too different from him: “I’ve had very limited exposure to other races and the few that I did were not really compatible personality wise.” Relatedly, Jared shared that he prefers white men because “I would say they tend to have more personality, maybe more character. More I guess, I would say maybe a higher sex drive.” Regardless of the specific reasoning, many participants felt that men of color were too dissimilar from themselves. This suggests that stereotypical representations of men of color in the media (Hill Collins 2005; Golash-Boza 2016) interact with the white spatial imaginary to affect whites’ perceptions of, and desires for, men of color.

For participants who did not state racial preferences for white men, colorblind framings were evident in their explanations of their racialized, majority-white partnering practices. In particular, many participants attributed partnering practices to the demographic composition of their living contexts. The participants’ mobility, however, suggests that racialized desires and partnering is due to more than just demographics. Indeed, of the 60 participants 15 reported hooking up with other men when traveling out of their town for work. Relatedly, a majority reported a willingness to travel at least some distance to hook up with men (depending on timing availability) or reported hooking up with men while out of town for some reason unrelated to work (e.g., family, leisure). Indeed, Jack consciously sought to hook up away from his living location for privacy reasons, stating that, “I would always make sure [hookups] happened far away from

home, from where I lived.” Most of Jack’s sexual partners were white even when he hooked up in urban areas with greater numbers of men of color. Many participants also reported that they hooked up with men who were passing through their areas. Billy, for instance, noted that “I don't even mess with guys here in town, normally travelers that trip through the area, or I'll take a trip through [a large regional city] on the weekend, and I'll just go fuckin' nuts, suckin' guys' dicks.” Thus, despite opportunities to hook up with men of color when they traveled to the participants’ areas or when participants traveled and hooked up out of town, most participants had racialized desires and partnering practices. Majority-white partnering practices, I argue, are not due directly to white-majority rural contexts in and of themselves. They are due to *white-majority rural contexts shaping participants’ desires for other white men*. Put differently, rural white straight culture shaped their desires for white men. Further, by hooking up with men similar to themselves and common in their white-majority contexts, participants were able to reinterpret sex with men as inconsequential to their identities. Hooking up with these men—who seemed “normal” to participants—helped them normalize their sexual practices as compatible with straightness and masculinity, and thus preserved their alignment with rural white straight culture.

### *Chapter Summary*

Participants aligned themselves with *straight culture*, which in their contexts was rural and white. Belonging in straight culture meant identifying as straight and acting masculine. Participants differed from one another in terms of sexual orientation, but all aligned themselves with straight culture. They felt that identifying as straight and

masculine was entirely compatible with occasional sex with men. They were not closeted. Instead, they felt connected to straight culture, and this was the main reason why they identified as straight. Overlapping institutions that facilitated identification as straight and masculine included childhood families of origin; religion; schools and youth sports; and adult families they formed by partnering to women and/or having children. These institutions were key pillars of rural straight culture, and affected how they saw themselves as men. Not coincidentally, these institutions are usually racially segregated in the rural U.S. This facilitated participants' identification with rural *white* straight culture. Desires to marry and/or raise children, in particular, were key reasons for their continued alignment with straight culture. Participants expressed varying degrees of homophobia, but all identified as straight for reasons other than homophobia.

Social forces, institutions, and contexts shape personal preferences, choices, and options available to individuals. Personal choices affect how individuals identify and express their sexuality and gender, but social structures play an enormous role in shaping individual choices. Identification with straightness and masculinity is due to structural and contextual factors, individual agency, and the interplay between the two. This yields insight into how *all masculine, straight-identified men come to see themselves as such*. Sexual orientation is only one piece of the puzzle. Participants genuinely enjoyed straight culture, including the (overwhelmingly white) communities and institutions associated with it. They also enjoyed its associated benefits, such as not experiencing homophobia. Overall, participants identified as straight and masculine because of their enjoyment of rural straight culture.

## CHAPTER III

### WHY THEY HAVE SEX WITH MEN

What I find attractive on men, and the only thing I find attractive on men, is a good lookin' dick. I could care less about his shoulders or his muscles or his eyes or his hair, whether he's fat or skinny, it don't matter. 'Cuz I'm not interested in any of that. My only attraction to a man would be his dick, and I find that my attraction goes towards smaller ones rather than bigger ones... I have no desire to do anal on a man, and I do not think that a man's ass looks good. I see comments on some of these places, "oh God, he's got such a good lookin' ass on him," not from my point of view he doesn't, I'm not interested. Like I said, the only thing I'm interested in is a hard dick and the only thing then is I want to make it cum and then I'm through with it, I don't want nothin' else to do with it. That's why I consider myself to be more straight than gay, I guess. (Richard, 75, rural Illinois)

Most participants did not report sex with men as a simple process of acting on attractions. Instead, they reported a set of complicated situations and interpretations that reworked sex with men as necessary and compatible with straight identification and masculinity. First, many experienced their sexual orientation in complex ways. Numerous participants reported experiencing sexual *desires* for men, or for penises specifically, but not sexual *attractions* to men. Second, many experienced changes to their bodies or sexual desires—or reported that their wives did—over the life course. About three-quarters reported unintentional changes to their sexual attractions or desires as they grew older. This encouraged them to begin having sex with men or to have sex with men more frequently. Additionally, over a third reported that their wives or women partners lost interest in sex, sometimes because it became painful or uncomfortable for them. This encouraged participants to have sex with men, as they considered that less threatening to their marriages than extramarital sex with women. Men's attractions, desires, and sexual practices can be flexible over the life course.

Third, many felt that men were better or more appropriate casual sexual partners than women. Participants preferred women for romantic partnerships, but most were wary of women for casual hookups. The trait they felt made women better romantic partners—emotional compatibility—also made many uncomfortable with women for hookups, as they felt women would become too attached. Thus, *beliefs about men and women's emotional complementarity actually encouraged sex with men*. This was especially impactful for married men, who did not want to threaten their marriage by having sex with another woman. Lastly, many participants reported sex with men to address needs related to masculinity. Several had sex with men specifically to form non-romantic connections with other men to relieve loneliness, experience connections with other men, or satisfy a need for touch. Others had sex with men to relieve the pressures of masculinity. Having another man penetrate them allowed participants to experience pleasure without having to be in control.

These themes reveal that it is not necessarily sexual *orientation* that distinguishes different groups of men, but sexual *identity* and the interpretations and cultural alignment associated with it. Participants had attractions all over the spectrum: 2 reported exclusive attractions to men, 6 primary attractions to men, 13 about equal attractions to men and women, 32 primary attractions to women, and 7 exclusive attractions to women. Participants were not simply closeted gay or bisexual men, even in terms of attraction. What tied participants together was their straight identity and alignment with straight culture, not their level of attraction to men. Their narratives also show the difference between “mostly straight” orientations and mostly straight identities. Nationally representative surveys show that 3.6-4.1% of men and 7.6-9.5% of women are mostly



straight in orientation (Savin-Williams and Vrangalova 2013). These individuals have a small amount of same-sex sexual and/or romantic attraction. Only some identify as mostly straight, however. Thus, two individuals with almost identical attractions and sexual practices can identify differently. Sexual identification also relates to men's stated reasons for having sex with other men. Men who identify as mostly straight and have sex with other men report doing so simply because they have some attraction to or desire for men (Savin-Williams 2017). In contrast, my straight-identified participants reported more complicated reasons for having sex with men. While a majority were "mostly straight" in orientation, only 7 identified as mostly straight in full or part.<sup>6</sup> Men who identify as straight differ from men who identify as mostly straight due to their level of alignment with straight culture and their stated reasons for having sex with other men.

*"I Like Dicks, I Don't Like Men": The Complexity of Sexual Orientation*

While sexual identities often cannot describe the complex ways in which individuals experience their sexual orientation, participants did not identify as straight just for that reason. All experienced their orientation as complex, but in different ways. They experienced a wide variety of sexual desires, fantasies, and attractions, and different sexual histories, but all had sex with men and identified as straight. What tied them together was not a similar sexual *orientation*, but a similar sexual *identity*. There are many different populations of men who have sex with men, and they are also tied together by identity rather than orientation. Participants in this project are different from men who identify as bisexual, gay, mostly gay, and even mostly straight. This is less because of their orientation and more because of how they perceive themselves.

---

<sup>6</sup> Of these 7, 5 identified as both straight *and* mostly straight.

Participants align themselves strongly with heterosexual identification and straight culture, and their complicated interpretations of their sexual practices reinforce this.

Many individuals experience their sexual orientation in ways that do not perfectly “match” the mainstream understanding of any given sexual identity. Sexual orientation includes emotional attractions and sexual attractions, practices, desires, and fantasies (Savin-Williams 2014). These aspects (in order) are feelings about with whom you want to romantically partner; who you find physically appealing; with whom you have sex; with whom you hypothetically want to have sex; and who you think about sexually, such as when masturbating. Those elements are related but distinct, and they do not always cluster in expected ways (Priebe and Svedin 2013). Emotional attractions and sexual attractions, for example, do not always perfectly align (Diamond 2003). Thus, a man can feel emotional attractions only to women but sexual attractions to both men and women. Emotional attraction and sexual attraction are independent, just as sexual attraction and sexual desire are related but independent (more on this later). Further, individuals experience elements of sexual orientation in different degrees. Mostly straight individuals, for instance, experience only a small amount of same-sex attraction (Savin-Williams and Vrangalova 2013). Sexual orientation is highly complex, due to (1) different components of it that do not always align and (2) different degrees to which people experience these components. This makes sexual identification more difficult, but helps explain why the participants had sex with men. Participant narratives complicate our understanding of sexual orientation while shedding more light on their sexual practices. Many reported having sex with men due to difficult-to-explain attractions; sexual desires or “cravings” in the absence of sexual attractions; or a kink for penises or

anuses. There were a variety of complicated feelings that encouraged them to have sex with other men.

Several participants reported that their attractions for men and women differed in terms of both *degree* and *type*. For instance, David (80% women, 20% men)<sup>7</sup> reported that his sexual attractions to men and women differed because he did not notice men in public like he did women. David's feelings about men changed only when he thought he might be able to have sex with them:

In a way, I'm sexually attracted in the possibility of having sex with them [men], but I don't see a guy walking down the street and say oh wow, that kind of thing. Like you do for women. And that still happens with women, it's like wow, she's really somethin'. But for me personally, I don't have that type of attraction for men. It's when I'm talking to someone and he says something, and I hear it, and we both receive it the same way, and we sort of look at each other, and nod, and realize there's an understanding there, and it may go further. Then I start to get interested.

David felt desire and attraction to men when he believed they may have been an opportunity for sex, but not generally before this point. This is different from his attraction to women, which involves both sexual interest and physical appreciation of their bodies. Rand shared similar thoughts about being attracted to men mostly if a possibility for sex arose:

I would say [laughs] I'm 100% attracted to women unless I put myself in a state that allows me to be attracted to men so that I can play with them. And what I mean by that is if I'm out in the world, for example, I almost never have found myself attracted to a guy. Once, a long time ago I was attracted to a guy in a diner. So, the attraction to men has more to do with their sex part and something that I'm allowing myself to do in order to be able to engage in sex in an easy way. So it's not the same kind of attraction that I, the natural attraction that I just have to women.

Rand's sexual attraction to men mostly reflected whether sex was possible with them, similar to David. While several participants were primarily drawn to women, they

---

<sup>7</sup> Numbers in parentheses represent reported sexual attractions.

reported openness to having sex with men in ways they found it difficult to explain. They found women's bodies sexually pleasing, which they did not generally feel about men, but nonetheless felt situational sexual interest in men if the possibility for sex arose.

Relatedly, other participants reported a *craving* for men: sexual desire for men, or penises, in the absence of sexual attraction. As Marcus shared, "it just seems like once in a while I'll just kind of get a craving, so to speak. It's like, hmm, I haven't done that in a long time, maybe I'll see if I can't do that... I think it's just more somethin' kinky, somethin' taboo, somethin' just a little bit different from the norm." Marcus reported exclusive attractions to women, but occasional sexual cravings for men. Six other participants shared similar feelings about cravings, but to *penises* rather than to the *men* attached to them. Richard, who shared the quote that titles this sub-section, noted that he is exclusively attracted to women. As he explained, "it's not about the person, I'm only interested in the dick." Joe similarly reported exclusive sexual attraction to women, but also a desire for penises:

It's strange, it's almost totally phallic. I don't know how to put it. Men don't attract me at all, whatsoever. The only attraction I have is women, but when men enjoy what I've got, I let them enjoy it. That's where I am... I have no interest in hugging a man, in kissing a man, in suckling his nipples, or anything else. Everything about a man that would interest me is his cock and balls. And even then, it's not the guy, it's those parts. That's it... I'm a straight guy. I do not lust after men whatsoever. I enjoy the company of a guy when it's correct, I do not like gay guys, I mean guys that are coming on to me, that want me as their partner, that doesn't interest me at all. A gay image, if I were to pull [one] up, I could get excited by a hard cock. But I'm not attracted to it, I don't seek it, I don't go out and go after it. A woman, a beautiful woman just lights my fire.

Joe, like Richard, enjoyed penises, but did not find men attractive. He enjoyed giving and receiving oral sex with men, but no other physical activities. A handful of participants shared similar sentiments, but about anuses. Chad (95% women, 5% men), for instance,

began having sex with men so he could experience anal eroticism, which his woman partner was not interested to explore: “I started becoming aware of those parts of my body that were sensitive in terms of not having used my anal region for pleasure in the past... My partner, my girlfriend, does not want to engage in this fantasy part of my sexuality.” While numerous participants reported enjoying anal sex, only a handful described having sex with men specifically to give or receive anal stimulation in the absence of substantial sexual attraction to men.

Participants’ cravings for men, penises, or anal eroticism—in the absence of substantial sexual attractions to men—may best be described as a *kink*. In the West, however, these interests are framed as indicative of sexual orientation. Dividing lines between what constitutes sexual orientation rather than a kink is entirely a social product. In the West, the biological sex of sexual partners (or desired sexual partners) is considered a marker of sexual orientation, whereas other sexual preferences are not. Why is it that men in the West are expected to identify in particular ways if they enjoy putting a penis in their mouth or anus, but not if they enjoy partners that are several decades older than them, for instance? Age is a key component of attraction for many individuals, even though it is not considered an essential part of our identity (Seto 2017). There are many other traits that shape attractions to a given person: body build, amount and distribution of body hair, height, political ideology, and so on. None except the sex(es) of sexual partners are considered a defining aspect of orientation in the U.S.

This differs across cultures. In one Papua New Guinea tribe, for instance, members believe that it is critical for adolescent boys to ingest the semen of older boys to become healthy men (Herdt 1987). As adults they are expected to only have sex with

women. Unlike in the West, male-male sex is considered an important ritual in this tribe, not a marker of identity or even of orientation. It may be fruitful to discard current Western understandings of sexual orientation in favor of a three-dimensional matrix of sexuality that incorporates multiple types of sexual preferences (Gordon and Silva 2015). Kinks for oral sex, penises, and/or anal eroticism are simply three types of sexual preferences among many.

### *Growing Older: Not Ready to Give Up Sex*

Key reasons many participants reported having sex with men involved changes to their bodies or desires, or that of their wives, over the life course. A handful of men described erectile dysfunction as encouraging sex with men. Over a third described sex becoming painful or undesirable for their wives. To continue having sex, participants turned to men. They viewed sex with men as more enjoyable, easier to find, and/or less threatening to their marriages than sex with women. Little research examines masculinity and sexuality over the life course (see Diefendorf 2015 for an exception), even though men may experience major changes to their sexual and gender practices. The results show that *men's sexual practices, desires, and attractions can be flexible over the life course*, even as many continue to identify as straight and masculine.

Three participants reported having sex with men in part because of erectile dysfunction (ED). Richard explained that a car accident left him unable to maintain an erection, even with medication. As a result, Richard began having sex with men:

I view myself as straight. And the reason for that is, the only reason that I will have anything to do with a dick is because I have no choice. If I'm going to have any sex at all, I'm gonna have to have it with a man. My two choices of sex with a man is to either give him a blowjob or let him fuck me. That's the only two

choices I got because I can't fuck him. If I could fuck anybody I'd find me a girl. If my dick could get hard, that would solve my [problem]. I'd get me a hooker on retainer.

While Richard preferred to have sex with women, he explained that it was too difficult to find women for sex—even without penetration—given his ED. Relatedly, Tom shared that “I'm a straight guy that has ED and doesn't want to give up havin' sex,” even though “I would rather be havin' sex with girls, if I could.” Tom further elaborated:

When I couldn't get hard anymore [I] kinda decided to switch teams. Probably the thought of touching another man's cock repulsed me 3-4 years ago, and now that I've done it a few times it doesn't bother me too much. It's more like, it's like a forbidden thing, kind of makes it exciting... Just strictly because I've got ED and I don't get hard anymore. So, I can take the submissive role with a guy and it's kinda nice that I don't have to perform. It's like I'm in control, like women are with guys. I still gotta perform, but it's kinda a power thing over the guys... They want to have sex, and I can provide that for them, and if I say no then I can't. When having sex with girls you're always afraid you're gonna cum too fast, or you won't be hard or you won't stay hard. Bein' a submissive, sex with guys, you're kinda in control, it's up to them to perform... The most deciding one [reason for sex with men] is that I can't get hard for girls. I had some girls suck me off, but I [was] not hard. It was OK, but I didn't feel too good about it, and so basically if I could get hard good and stuff like that, if I could get hard all the time I never woulda started with guys. And now, if I get my ED under control, I still might stay with guys too, just because I like makin' 'em happy. I like the attention they give me... That's why I'm havin' sex with guys now, because I don't get hard, and if I could get a hard erection again, I don't know. I've always been a little bit kinky, so I may still. But for me it's only recreational, it's not a physical attraction at all.

Tom was mostly attracted to women, and began having sex with men because of ED. As he gained more experience with male-male sex, he began enjoying it more. Indeed, he turned his erectile dysfunction into a kink, such that he could experience sexual pleasure through bottoming and performing submissiveness. Interpreting bottoming as a way to maintain control helped Tom continue to identify as masculine. This interpretation required rejecting mainstream associations between being penetrated and being vulnerable, which likely required extensive interpretive work. While only a few men

noted disability or ED as a key reason for having sex with men, it was important for their narratives.

Their decisions to have sex with men, rather than non-penetrative sex or physical intimacy with women, reveals how many straight men see penetration as a key aspect of sex. While participants with ED could have still had sex with women through mutual masturbation or by giving oral to women, they evidently felt that this was not adequate. Men who are exclusively attracted to women yet want to be anally penetrated, such as Richard and Tom, have the option of being pegged by women: having women top them with a dildo (Aguilar 2017). Many men fear that their women partners will see them as gay or feminine if they ask for pegging, however (Stewart 2018). This encourages them to turn to men for anal stimulation. Thus, *beliefs about the importance of penetration for heterosexual sex, and the widespread association between insertive anal sex and gayness and/or femininity, counter-intuitively encourage some men to have sex with other men.* This is a glaring contradiction within the institution of heterosexuality.

Over a third of the sample noted that sex became painful, uncomfortable, or less desirable for their wives. Because participants wanted to continue having sex, they turned to men. They felt sex with men was more enjoyable, easier to find, and/or less threatening to their marriages than sex with women. Participants felt that having sex with men benefited everyone: they continued having sex, whereas their wives stopped having sex or had sex much less frequently. It is inappropriate to say that these women “caused” their husbands to have sex with men, or that it is their “fault” the participants did so. Individuals have every right to stop having sex with their partners, for any reason. Given



that the participants wanted to continue having sex without feeling as though they were cheating on their wives, they turned to men.

Numerous participants identified wives experiencing disability, age-related bodily changes, or sexual disinterest as key reasons for having sex with men. Chris shared that his wife “has a horrible lack of interest anymore. And I've just gotten to accept it, don't argue, [don't] try to get it anymore.” He continued, explaining “I guess if I were getting somethin' at home it probably wouldn't be as much as what I look for otherwise,” and that “even though we're 60 years old we still have desires. And if you can't get it at home, well, you get tired of yourself.” Brian noted something similar:

Just to give you an example, the last time was just before Thanksgiving. I romanced the wife all day Friday, romanced her all day Saturday, thought I was gonna get lucky on Sunday, nothin' happened. And literally by Monday, before Thanksgiving, I genuinely had a bad case of blue balls. I thought I was gonna explode. I was in pain, wife went to work, called my buddy, he came over, and he goes oh crap your scrotum is really swollen, and I says well I tried romancin' my wife Friday Saturday Sunday, blah blah blah, and she's just not interested. It's like eh, even when we have sex, ok, I'll get around to it. It's like eh, I'm sorry. He and I put on some porn, watched some porn, 2 or 3 movies, these are like 15 minute clips, they're not like full length clips or anything, jerk each other off and we're good to go for another month or so.

Brian hoped that his wife would regain interest in sex, but in the meantime he hooked up with friends. He found it easier than trying to have sex with his wife. Echoing other participants, Jared noted that the least favorite part of his sex life was the low frequency of sex with his wife: “my first priority would be to always have it with my wife, but when it's not very frequent that's when I tend to look for others... She used to have a higher sex drive so I would say it's less than when we got married, and it continues to decline.”

Several participants, such as Pat, noted that no longer having sex with their wives was the sole reason they decided to have sex with men:

Wife gave up sex after the third child. I think she finally figured out what caused it. After all three children left the house, and got their education started, I thought maybe sex would start up again, but it didn't. Well, that was our first bout with breast cancer. And uh, part of the chemo removed any estrogen she had. And then she informed me she wasn't sleepin' in the master bedroom anymore. I said that's fine. We had three other bedrooms. And I said I'm not leavin' the master bedroom. So, I guess about five years ago I finally decided well, I can't live this way anymore, I've got to have some blowjobs. Or the little woman has to start spreadin' her legs.

Pat further elaborated that “after my wife gave up sex, for years I didn't have any sexual activity at all. Like 15, 20 years. And then I decided this is for the birds. And I decided I'll find some guy that likes to suck cock and get my cock sucked, and that's what I've been doing.” Dissatisfied with his lack of sex at home but unwilling to leave his wife or feel that he was being unfaithful, Pat turned to men. Aaron also started having sex with men after his wife lost interest in sex:

As it [our marriage] went on and we had children, frequency decreased. And I can remember a situation after we were either close to empty nesters or just before we were empty nesters I decided just to see what would happen if I never initiated the sex with my wife, and this was probably late 40s or early 50s. And that time that I never initiated sex with my wife we had it like twice in a year. And that may have been the tipping point for seeking sex outside the marriage.

Aaron's desire for more sex led him to begin having sex with men. Unhappy with his wife's low sex drive, he sought men who were more eager for sex.

Participants described situations with their wives differently. Some seemed genuinely understanding, empathetic, and respectful, whereas others expressed annoyance, frustration, and even misogyny. While secretive extramarital sex presents complicated ethical issues, it is preferable to pressuring or manipulating partners into sex. It is potentially unsafe for men to secretly have extramarital sex and also have sex with their wives—due to possible STI transmission—but similar issues are not present when

no sex with wives is involved. Thus, there are ethical distinctions between men that continue to have sex with their wives and men that do not.

It would have been ideal for participants to discuss their male-male sex with their wives, of course. It is not surprising that they did not, however. Open relationships and/or polyamory are ideal for many people (Schippers 2016), but they are stigmatized. This makes it difficult for partners to talk to each other about opening up or expanding their relationship. There is also little media representation, so many people are not even aware that ethical non-monogamy is an option. Partly as a result, few people are in open relationships: only 4% of American couples are open (Levine et al. 2018). Additionally, because same-sex sexuality is stigmatized, many participants were afraid to discuss their male-male sex with their wives. Given the constraints that structured their lives, participants chose to have sex with men to meet their sexual desires, remain married, and feel as though they were not threatening their marriages.

### *Changing sexual attractions*

Overall, 45 of 60 men reported experiencing changes to their sexual attractions or sexual desires over the course of their lives. These changes were unintentional, unexpected, and long lasting. While some participants experienced changes in their teens or 20s, for most it happened in their 30s, 40s, 50s, or even 60s. That most participants experienced this well after youth reinforces that sexual attractions can be flexible throughout adulthood. Most reported that their sexual attractions or desires shifted from exclusively women to mostly women, or reported that pre-existing attractions to men grew stronger. These shifts, while often subtle, were profound. They encouraged many

participants to begin having sex with men for the first time, or to seek out sexual encounters with men more than in the past. While researchers have focused on women's capacity to experience changes to their attractions (e.g., Diamond 2009), far fewer have examined men. Some participants noted that their attractions changed *after* they began having sex with men, whereas for others their attractions or desires for men came *before* they began having sex with men. Aging affected how participants experienced their sexual orientation, showing that it is not necessarily fixed from a young age. This complements my previous research with a nationally representative sample of young adults, which shows that 9.3% of men reported changes to their romantic attractions in just the six years between the two surveys they filled out (Silva 2017).

While some participants felt that their changes to attractions were “caused” by having sex with men, we cannot actually determine causality. Indeed, several participants had sex with numerous men but remained exclusively attracted to women. Why do some continue to feel exclusive attractions to women, whereas others do not? Some psychologists have concluded that shifting attractions are caused by a complex interplay of environment and biology (e.g., Diamond 2009). My interest as a sociologist is less in what causes these attractions to change, and more how men reported experiencing them. As we read these narratives, there are two key takeaways to keep in mind. First, their stories are *not* coming out narratives, nor are they stories about how they “realized” their attractions. Instead, their experiences demonstrate that male sexual desires and attractions are flexible throughout the life course. Their willingness to act on this may reflect changing cultural norms. While stigmatized, male-male sex has become less so since the 1980s. Second, many men interpret this flexibility using the identities they already hold.

They already saw themselves as straight and masculine, and this did not change even as their attractions and practices did. Identities, and the interpretive frameworks that support them, are resistant to change—even as sexual practices, attractions, and desires are flexible.

Many participants reported that their sexual attractions increased after having sex with a man. While their attractions may have continued to shift over time, they pointed to one key event as the beginning of the changes to their attractions. Kevin had long experienced minor attractions to men, but they increased to about 75-25 women-men<sup>8</sup> after a hookup with a man in his 30s:

I grew up in an area where that wasn't an option, in a time and area both. And I never really thought about it. I had attractions a time or two, a few times, but nothin', never was with a guy, never touched a guy, never anything. Until I was in my mid-30s, and that kind of happened by accident, and I liked it, and been kinda doin' it ever since... After that, I was attracted more, I wouldn't say more to men than women, but my attraction, my thoughts about men shall we say escalated. It did change, it changed a lot. And I seen it was an option, and it was good.

After Kevin unexpectedly hooked up with a man when he was in his mid-30s, his attractions to men increased. He also saw, for the first time, that it was an option to have sex with men even as he continued identifying as straight. Relatedly, Ernie noted that his attractions to men “probably first shifted after my first experience with a man. Because I used to not have any attraction to men and then after it happened it became more.” He said that he experienced his attractions shifting from exclusively women to 80-20 women-men as “pretty sudden.” Several participants’ attractions to men shifted abruptly, especially after an unexpected sexual encounter. This helped them realize that sex with men was a possibility for them—and an enjoyable one.

---

<sup>8</sup> Not all participants were able to describe their proportion of sexual attractions to women and men before and after they experienced them shifting. Most used imprecise language like “a little” or “a lot”, even after follow-up questions. I note exact proportions when participants did report them.

Most participants described their attractions shifting as a process, and several identified a particular sexual encounter that they felt began this change. David described a group sex experience that he believed influenced his attractions to change from exclusively to women to 80-20 women-men:

Well, up until about [10 years ago] I didn't have any sexual, physical attraction to men, in any way. That all came on fairly recently. Up until then it was all women, even when we had three-ways, two guys and my wife, I didn't feel any sexual attraction to them. They were just part of the mix, they were just doin' their thing and I was doin' my thing. And then I was [in my late 50s], I met a couple in a motel room that I talked to online... first thing I noticed about him was that he was shaved. I had never seen a man shaved before. And so was she, she was sittin' on the bed and he was just standin' there. Anyway, something, I don't know what it was, I just reached out and held him. For strange reason, it just dawned on me, and he didn't mind at all, and I said "I've never seen 'em shaved like this." Anyway we went through the process and I was screwin' her, and they had both told me to be sure to tell them when I was ready to cum. And so I was about ready, so I said "OK, I'm ready to cum," and he reached out and held my balls while I came in her. And that was probably one of the best feelin' things in my life. I could not believe it, and after it was all done and I had left and I was thinkin' back on that, it was like wow, that was mind blowing. I thought hmm, there might be something worth pursuin' there, with a guy. And that's kinda how it started. It took a long, long time, it was probably 4-5 years before I actively started targeting guys online, but that's really what started it.

While David had group sexual encounters with men previously, he felt it was this experience that began a process whereby his sexual attractions changed. Later, he would begin meeting up with men one-on-one "because I knew that sex with men could be fun, and I hadn't realized it up until then." Many participants reported suddenly realizing that sex with men could be enjoyable, putting them on a new sexual trajectory. These situations were diverse, ranging from pre-arranged threesomes to spontaneous hookups with random men.

Others also experienced their attractions changing as a process, but noted general life changes rather than a specific event as the beginning of the changes. Harrison

explained that his attractions increased “dramatically, much more towards men” after divorcing his wife. It was at that point that he also began seeking sex with men, which he did not do during marriage. Relatedly, Will shared that “I would positively say it has changed, when checkin’ out people, I probably check out more guys than I do females.” This changed from before, when “it would have been female, and then an occasional checkin’ out a dude, he looks good, he's fit, he's clean. You know, just wondering.” Will’s sexual attractions shifted from mostly women to about equal women-men, leaning toward men. His wife divorced him in middle age for reasons unrelated to his male-male attractions, allowing him to sexually explore after their separation. Seamus described his sexual attractions shifting from 95-5 women-men to 80-20 women-men after joining the military. He explained that this major institutional change led him to notice men more: “Probably just noticing guys, when I was in the military. Just proximity, because I grew up in a small town. And when I joined the military I was around a lot more men than women... It was a process.” Although he eventually left the military, his attractions did not revert to what they had been prior to joining it. Although mainstream narratives posit that men in mostly-male contexts like the military have sex with other men out of desperation, this is not necessarily true (Ward 2015). Instead, as with Seamus, new institutional contexts may actually shape attractions and desires. Participants identified a variety of circumstances, situations, and events that they felt were related to their attractions changing, which encouraged them to seek sex with men.

Numerous participants attributed changes to their attractions specifically to Internet access. With it came opportunities to meet men for sex, talk in chatrooms, and view gay pornography. While all participants felt that the Internet made hooking up

easier, several specifically described Internet access as key for their shifting attractions.

Chris, for instance, described his attractions shifting from exclusively to women to about

75-25 women-men:

Probably with the advent of the Internet I've acquired a little bit more interest in guys... I didn't really know that much about anything with men prior to that because it's just been a straight life my whole life... It would have been all women, 100% women... My interests extended when I was online, just checkin' out different areas.

Internet access allowed Chris to explore his sexuality and begin having sex with men, which went hand-in-hand with his increasing attractions to them. Several other men explained that being able to access new information online opened their eyes, so to speak, to new sexual possibilities. Thus, historical and technological changes may help shape sexual attractions and desires, as well as make it easier to find sexual partners.

In sum, participants shared a wide variety of situations, events, and circumstances that they felt contributed to their sexual attractions or desires unintentionally changing. Some experienced this as a single event, though most described it as a process. The most common themes participants identified as contributing to this change included having sex with a man, growing older, and/or experiencing declining sex with their wives. We again cannot determine causality. Regardless, their narratives show that men's sexual desires and attractions can be flexible over the life course—and with them, sexual practices. They also demonstrate that even fairly small changes to attractions or desires can facilitate profound changes to sexual practices. In any case, none of the participants had plans to romantically partner with a man. The changes they experienced were primarily sexual, and most participants either did not have emotional attractions to men or actively avoided situations where they might emerge.



*Sex with Men: Easier or Better*

About half of participants felt that sex with men was better or easier than it was with women. They attributed this to various factors, including women's general incapability of having casual, non-romantic sex; women's subsequent disinterest in casual sex; and/or men's better sexual complementarity, making sex with men more straightforward, exciting, or pleasurable. While participants preferred women for romantic relationships, many felt that men were a better choice for casual sexual encounters. Here we see the effects of straight culture on the participants' perceptions. As rural, straight, masculine men, most of the institutions that affected their lives subtly stressed purportedly natural gender differences and emotional complementarity between men and women. This encouraged romantic relationships with women, and helped shape participants' genuine desires for marital relationships with women. This same belief about emotional complementarity, however, made participants wary of casual sex with women. Many felt that women had a natural instinct to be emotional and nurturing, and that men and women had natural emotional attraction to one another. Emotional women were matches for emotionally uncomplicated men. Consequently, sex with women was too difficult to find—because women were less inclined to casual sex—or too risky, since there was such a high potential for emotional attachment. Thus, *conservative beliefs about men and women's emotional complementarity actually encouraged sex between men*. Here is yet another contradiction within the institution of heterosexuality, which is dependent on understandings of men and women as sexual and emotional opposites.

Ten participants felt that sex with men was better than sex with women, either because men engaged in sexual practices women did not enjoy<sup>9</sup> (e.g., rimming<sup>10</sup>) or simply provided a more pleasurable experience. Just as most participants considered women complementary *romantic* partners, several considered men to be better *sexual* partners. David, like several others, related this to the aging process:

Sex with men right now for me is very gratifying. Older men particularly are a lot more receptive to sex. They're more enthusiastic. They seem to get more pleasure out of it. Senior women have kinda lost their desire to do much of anything. Generally my wife is the one who is real passive, she's nice enough and willing in that, but not a lot of fun. Men, there's a lot of men in my situation who have reached this age and they're still interested in sex, they still want to do things, but their domestic partner that they've had forever is not really interested anymore. So they were reaching out to someone who is, and finding that there are a lot of senior men in the same situation. Bottom line is, sex is fun, feels good. None of us I don't think are lookin' to remarry or anything, we're just looking for recreational sex to have fun. At least I am, and most of the people, most of the men I see, which isn't a lot, are pretty much the same way.

David explained that sex was more pleasurable with men, and also that it required him to rethink the relationship between sex, pleasure, and masculinity:

I think the way we're raised has a lot to do with it. There's so much social pressure to be a straight, he-man type thing, they completely forget the pleasurable side of sex, and we're taught not to do that. Now when you find out your wife no longer wants to do it, you get re-taught.

David's masculinity changed as he grew older, as he began prioritizing sexual pleasure (with men) over the mechanical pursuit of sex with women. His explanation reinforces that men's sexual practices and understandings of their masculinity can change over time, even as they continue to identify as straight and masculine. He once pursued sex with women in part because it bolstered his masculinity to simply have sex with women, regardless of the amount of pleasure he experienced. Later in life, however, he began

---

<sup>9</sup> This is aside from practices that necessarily involve another penis.

<sup>10</sup> Orally stimulating the anus, which a handful of participants reported enjoying giving and receiving.

focusing on his pleasure, and felt that sex with men allowed him to do this better than sex with women. While David's wife still consented to sex, she was not "enthusiastic" about it as men were. Jordan echoed the idea that sex with men is more pleasurable than sex with women, and specifically his wife:

I think that for us men it's hugely physical. But in a monogamous relationship with a woman, it becomes more than that, it becomes very mental, very emotional. And then all of a sudden no matter what you do, they can't orgasm, and pretty soon it becomes a very one-sided thing. Pretty soon for us we couldn't even have intercourse, and it just became a very one-sided thing. I was always getting off and shooting my load, and that was it. And that became very frustrating. But since that time what I've found is that she wants to continue doing that, and that's fine, but I've found now that I've experienced a man. And that's the frustrating part, a man, I can watch him shoot his load and know he's having as much fun as I am. And I'm more turned on by that than a one-sided deal with my wife... I love oral, my wife has given me oral, but not like a man. I want her to just get so aggressive and suck my dick to the point where I'm saying I'm gonna shoot and then jacks me off. But that's never happened. And I loved givin' her oral, but she didn't like it so much. So we just never went there hardly at all. And I always wondered, how can you not like that, oh my gosh, I like it. And maybe it's a man thing, I don't know... You always hear that a man gives a better blowjob than a woman ever could. And I love my dick sucked, I love to cum, and yet women are not so much, [they don't] want to do that, and especially to climax. [To] have an orgasm and [for a partner to] swallow, I've never had that happen with a woman, ever.

Jordan, like others, felt that oral sex with men was better than it was with women.

Because his wife did not experience as much pleasure from their sex as he did, Jordan decided to look elsewhere. He sensed his wife's disinterest in sex, and did not want to ask her to have sex she found unpleasurable. David and Jordan's narratives reveal that they, as well as other participants, were not simply interested in their own sexual pleasure.

They wanted their partners to experience it as well. Given that they did not believe their wives genuinely enjoyed sex, they sought it with others. Zach, who was single, shared similar sentiments about sex being more exciting with men:

I think men understand men sexually better than women do. And therefore I felt that a man can please a man better than a woman can at times... the experiences that you have with women are the same all the time, but men are a little bit different, men do things differently. Women [are] kind of just the same... The reason I meet up with men is, I feel like strangely if my need is being met then I'm able to meet their needs. Once again I can tell the difference. When you're with a woman they don't really express themselves like a man does, and they don't react like a man does. A lot of times they're just passive and they expect you to do everything, so to speak, and I guess that's the way it's always been. But when you're with another man they're not always passive, they may be aggressive, and so I find that exciting and a little bit challenging to see what role is going to come out or what's going to happen... So you just never knew what was going to happen, and I think that's what's so different, and that's what maybe makes it more exciting I guess. You don't know what's going to happen, whereas when you're with a woman the same thing always happens, it doesn't change any.

Zach felt that men were more sexually pleasurable and exciting. Indeed, he explained that “I would prefer to be with a woman, but they're dull... if there's gonna be a romance I'd rather it be with a woman, but I'm not really sure if she could meet all of my needs or not, and that would bother me. That's kind of why I just stay the way I am right now [single].”

While Zach preferred to romantically partner with a woman, he was not willing to sacrifice what he thought of as natural sexual complementarity between two men. Jeremy also shared that sex with men was more exciting than sex with women:

There are very specific reasons or specific instances when I would be more attracted to seeking of a sexual experience with a man. I find it very difficult to reach an orgasm when a woman is performing oral sex on me and I really like that feeling of being able to come to an orgasm while I'm receiving oral sex. I don't have any problems at all reaching an orgasm when a man is performing oral sex on me. So that was the reason for my initial sexual experience with a male, and that continues to be probably the major attraction, a major goal that I'm looking for... I think part of it is because it is another man, there's something about, it might be a power thing seeing another man subjugate himself to me whether it's on his knees or in between my legs. Somehow it's a very powerful feeling to look down and see another man's mouth filled with your penis and wanting you to have an orgasm in his mouth. There's something about that, and I find that men, in my experience anyway, are much more likely to want you to ejaculate in their mouth. Whereas in my experience very few women want it, some will allow it, some won't allow it at all.

Oral sex with men was vastly more arousing for Jeremy than oral sex with women. A large part of this is because he felt it was more sexually exciting to penetrate another man than a woman. Thus, Jeremy's sex with men—receiving oral sex—bolstered his masculinity. While many men find sexual dominance over women arousing, Jeremy found that consensual power dynamics with men were more pleasurable. Jeremy was one of the few participants who fetishized penetration with men in this way. A sizable portion of the sample felt that sex with men was simply better than sex with women, even as they preferred women for romantic relationships.

Many participants felt that women were less capable of separating sex from emotion than men. They therefore felt that women were more difficult to find, and riskier to deal with, than men. Thus, while almost all preferred women as romantic partners, and many felt that women and men shared emotional complementarity, it was this emotional complementarity that raised red flags for them. For this reason, sex with men was just easier, as they felt it mostly avoided the possibility for romantic attachment. As Ian shared,

Sometimes it's less complicated, with women sometimes especially [with] the more emotional, social aspect of the sexual encounter. Whereas men are able to more easily separate a sexual encounter from feelings or emotions, they can categorize that, yeah, this is just to get together for sexual release because, they're needing [it]. [Guys] can be more readily available, if you're looking for a hookup off Craigslist for example, you're much more likely to be able to do that with another man... so part of it is effort and availability.

Ian believed men were more sex-oriented than women. Men could “get off” and leave, with no added complications. Connor also felt that no-strings-attached (NSA) sex was more secure with men, and also much easier to find:

I prefer women and I date women, but I sleep with, or have sex with guys just because it's a lot easier and more convenient. Casual sex with men is a lot simpler

than it is with women. So I guess, I really never have casual sex with women... It's almost, it's hard to say if it's a sexual attraction, just because invariably enough it's more of a convenience or availability thing, just because it was easier to find a man, or to hook up casually with a guy than it would be with a woman... Just thinking about casual sex now, it quite often goes to the male side of it and I'm actually a little bit wary, more wary about female casual sex, like if I looked on a Craigslist ad or something like that, and it had a woman wanting to hook up, it would be more off-putting. Like it would be a little bit scary, like what's wrong with her, [laughs], or what's going on, that she's looking for casual sex. But I wouldn't have any problems having casual sex with a guy. I wouldn't think anything about it... Over the last 5 plus years, most of my sexual experience has been with men. So I guess just the idea of it actually happening [is] more plausible. I guess it's more plausible that I would have sex with a man than a woman at this point.

Emotion structured Connor's feelings about casual sex in two main ways. First, he felt that men were more capable of having non-romantic sex than women. Second, for this reason, sex with men was easier to find, and less risky. He actually distrusted women who sought casual sex, since he felt that women who were looking for casual sex had something wrong with them. Pat, in contrast, explained that men were a better choice for sex than women because they would not gossip:

I decided, well, I'm not livin' this way. So that's when I started lookin' for guys that wanted to give blowjobs. Now your next question is why didn't I choose women. I could have, and would have, but you've got to think the whole thing through. You've got to be logical. Were I to have an affair with a woman on the side, women are gonna talk. They're emotional. They're gonna talk. They're gonna let the secret out. As opposed to meeting up with a straight man, they're not gonna talk. They're not gonna let the secret out. So I guess that's when I decided... men are more discreet, men won't talk, women will talk amongst themselves, and it's been my observation that sooner or later if you hook up with a woman then word gets out and we have a terrible knock-down, drag-out situation. I thought about that before I decided to hook up with men and then I thought no, men are in the same boat I am. And will not talk.

Given that Pat was married, he felt that sex with men was the easiest and most secure way to get off without threatening his marriage. He felt that women were too emotional and prone to talking amongst themselves, and therefore too risky. Relatedly, Richard—

who was single and divorced—explained that women were not interested in sex but demanded considerable financial and time investments, necessitating sex with men. As he detailed,

Women my age, the only thing they're interested in is they want you to take 'em to church, buy 'em things, and take care of them, basically. I'm not into takin' care of a woman. They're not interested in sex, that's for sure, no way in hell... Now I'm quite sure if I coughed up enough money, and I got my hair cut, and I went out and bought me a real nice suit, and I cleaned my car out really really good, and detailed it a lot, and contacted one of these women and played the courtship game for two or three weeks, I could probably get a date with her, and take her out to dinner, and buy her whatever the hell she wanted for dinner, and spent a pleasant evening talking. And then I could take her home and let her go home, and that would be the end of it, and after 10-15 dates like that she might possibly consent to maybe doin' a little neckin'. But that's it, I'm out 3-4000 dollars, I'm sorry, I'm not interested, I just don't want to deal with the drama, and I've dealt with drama and women all my life. And my buddy and I, there's no drama. He gets horny, he wants a blowjob, I go give him one, he's happy, I'm happy, we discuss politics.

For a NSA situation, Richard felt that the answer was obvious: have sex with men. This demanded little to no emotional, financial, or time investment. After his divorce, Richard preferred sex with men over romance with women. As Adam said simply, “I think men are a lot less complicated and that it's just easier. It's sex but there's no attachment. I don't think women can do that.” As Otto humorously phrased it, “I would rather be with a woman, but given my circumstances, it's easier to be with men... [Sex with women is] too hard... with a man, it can happen almost immediately if you're attractive or you have a big dick or, I don't know, not a leper.” Participants expressed that sex with men was almost a guarantee, unlike with women.

Overall, participant beliefs about men's and women's natural emotional complementarity actually encouraged them to have sex with men. It is true that women face much more stigma for hooking up than men do (Armstrong and Hamilton 2009), and

consequently some women may be more hesitant to hook up than men. There are nonetheless many women who are interested to hook up, however, so men's choices to hook up with other men are due to more than a supply/demand situation. It in part reflects their views on essential gender differences, which they felt made romantic ties between men and women natural but casual sex much riskier.

### *Bonding, Cuddling, and Relieving Masculinity Pressures*

Many participants interpreted sex with men as a way to connect or bond with other men or to relieve the pressures of masculinity. For participants who described the first theme, sex with men was not necessarily their main goal in meeting up with a man. Sex, however, was their strategy for reliably connecting with another man in a masculine way. This theme reveals a tension within conventional masculinity: in order for men to bond with other men in an acceptably masculine way, many feel as though sex is necessary. Sex, in other words, makes the encounter masculine—even if it is sex with men. Sharing feelings of loneliness or expressing a desire for a male cuddle-buddy may be too feminine or gay, but having sex is acceptably masculine. Further, by virtue of the fact that participants interpreted sex with men as necessary for bonding or connection with other men, they rendered it compatible with straight identification. Additionally, relieving the pressures of masculinity with another masculine man allowed participants to experience sexual pleasure without additional pressures and expectations. Hooking up with men who “topped” them was a gift: sexual pleasure outside the gendered constraints of conventional heterosexual sex. Again we see a tension within the institution of heterosexuality, and the gender binary that upholds it. Participants partnered to a woman



could have asked for pegging so that they could experience sexual pleasure while relieving masculine pressures to maintain control. Rather than express this vulnerability and perhaps be labeled as gay or feminine, they turned to sex with men.

Sex with men provided several participants a reason to meet up with, and thus connect with, other men. Meeting up for sex made the encounter feel masculine. It also helped prevent participants from feeling as though they were expressing vulnerability in seeking to connect with other men. As Trevor explained, "I don't think I meet up [with] them so much for sex as I meet up with them for companionship and sex is the vehicle for meeting up." Being with other men for companionship was ideal because it remained painful for Trevor to hook up with men after his wife's death. Other types of companionship were not possible because "Craigslist just doesn't have a category for fishing buddies or hunting buddies." Limited options for meeting men is a particular challenge in rural areas, which have smaller and less dense populations. Jack shared similar sentiments:

And the only reason that I would do it would be just for the physical need of wanting to hold a man, I guess... It wasn't for, it wasn't to get my rocks off per se, because I just wasn't that horny. It was just because I like that physical connection with a man... my wife and I were havin' some hard times, we're divorced now, but we were goin' through some pretty hard times, and I just could connect with a man. But it wasn't, no emotions were ever involved. It just felt good to be in the company of a man for sex.

Numerous participants, such as Jack, desired non-romantic companionship or touch. Sex with men was the way they were able to fulfill this need, since they did not know of another way to intimately connect with men. Harrison similarly shared that he has sex with men because "I think it's loneliness... just holding, healthy holding. Being single it's a deprivation, people are meant to not be alone. So it's something I like." Building on

this, Val explained that he enjoys cuddling because it is “just, somewhat [of] a bonding experience I guess, and you just enjoy each other's body without being overtly sexually active, although it usually eventually leads that way.” Uniquely, Joey shared that,

Maybe a reason that an aging male would reach out to other men is that as one's testosterone declines and your sexual prowess declines, you maybe want to be seeing that close up in other men, sort of reclaiming it in a way. I think that's no small matter, all things start to slow down a little bit, the time it takes to get an erection, the volume of semen and so on, and to be close to men who are maybe more potent than I am, that's a good thing to see. It's stimulating to see that, and it reminds me of powers that I had and still have but maybe in a somewhat diminished capacity.

Sex with men was a way for Joey to rekindle his feelings of masculine virility. Seeing younger men get off reminded him of his own youth, and helped him cope with changes to his body from aging. Multiple participants sought non-romantic connection, bonding, or touch with other men in a way that was compatible with normative masculinity. Sex helped them achieve this, even if they were not looking for sex per se. Participants either did not know how to intimately connect with men in ways other than sex or were uncomfortable with the potential emotional vulnerability involved with them.

Relatedly, another key reason many participants sought sex with men was to help relieve the pressures of masculinity. Sex with men was an opportunity to *not* have to be in control. Carrillo and Hoffman (2017) found a similar theme in their online interview study. Being penetrated allowed participants to experience pleasure outside of the strict confines of normative heterosexual sex, in which men pursue and penetrate women. Chris explained that “my job demands that I'm in control of things quite a bit, and I like to have that control taken away from me.” Similarly, Neil described that “in my everyday life I'm a straight, macho, masculine guy, an alpha male type of a guy. So sometimes when I'm spending time with guys I want to be the opposite of that, be the submissive.” Sexual

submissiveness for Neil, Chris, and others was a welcome break from feeling constant pressure to be in control. Rand expressed a similar feeling: “part of it for me has been about trying to tap into feminine sexuality and what women feel. And so topping has never even come close to being interesting for me. Bottoming is about being the receiver and surrender.” Relatedly, Sam shared that “with the evolution I really like being bottom. It feels amazing and the orgasms are really nice and since, it kind of makes me feel like a sexy object, and not having to be in control all the time is nice.” Connor also expressed that “I guess if I had to admit it, it's a small ego boost to have somebody attracted to you, so you get a little bit of that encouragement. And a physical release, it was kinda refreshing to actually go to bar and be the person somebody chased, rather than the guy who is constantly chasing women around.” More men described enjoying sexual submissiveness to relieve the pressures of masculinity than to continue meeting masculine expectations through sexual dominance over other men. Counter-intuitively, the way many participants preserved their everyday masculine presentations was to bottom for men. This relieved pressures associated with masculinity, and allowed them to continue on in their daily lives as before.

### *Chapter Summary*

In this Chapter I explored why the participants had sex with men. It was more than a process of acting on attractions, given that over half of the men reported exclusive or primary attractions to women. First, many participants experienced their sexual orientation in complex ways. For instance, many experienced sexual *desires* for men—or penises, specifically—but not sexual *attractions* to men. Second, as participants’ wives

experienced aging-related bodily changes that made sex difficult or impossible, or simply lost desire for sex, participants turned to other men. Most participants also experienced unintentional shifts to their sexual attractions or desires over the course of their lives, especially in middle age. Men's attractions, desires, and sexual practices can be flexible over the life course.

Third, many men felt that sex with other men was easier to find, had less potential for unwanted emotional attachment, and/or was more enjoyable than sex with women. Beliefs about emotional complementarity between men and women actually facilitated casual sex with men. Here we see a tension in the institution of heterosexuality itself. Men and women are socialized to believe they are natural emotional partners, and thus that heterosexuality as an institution is natural. Many participants felt that this made women more difficult to find for hookups or riskier partners, since women may become too emotionally attached. Further, several felt that men—as sexual beings—simply knew how to make sex for one another better. *Beliefs about purportedly natural gender differences, which together uphold the alleged naturalness of heterosexuality as an identity and institution, actually encouraged sex between men.*

Gendered social constraints make casual sex less stigmatizing for men than for women, so differences in how men and women approach casual sex is not due simply to biology. (And of course, many women do enjoy casual sex.) A sexual double standard (Armstrong and Hamilton 2009) discourages women from hooking up and stigmatizes those who do. Differences in the proportion of men and women seeking casual hookups reflect in large part this sexual double standard. Thus, *the gendered social forces that discourage women from having casual sex actually encourage men to have sex with one*

*another*. If as sexual creatures men need casual sex, and if as emotional creatures women prefer partnerships with men rather than no-strings-attached sex, then men need to turn to other men to fulfill their sexual needs. Heterosexuality, as an institution, is full of contradictions. The workings of heterosexuality *as an institution* illustrate how gendered sexual socialization affects how it operates. Of course there are men only attracted to women, and vice versa. It is heterosexuality as an *institution* that is full of tensions.

Lastly, many participants used sex with men to build connections with other men, experience human touch, and relieve the pressures of masculinity. Their narratives reveal contradictions within normative masculinity. While expressing vulnerability and a need for human connection or touch is not normatively masculine, sex is (Flood 2008; Loe 2001). Participants used sex to address needs for connection and touch in a normatively masculine way. While sex with men is not usually considered normatively masculine, it allowed participants to address needs for companionship and touch using the only strategy they knew of—sex—that was compatible with masculinity. Sex with men allowed some participants to address non-sexual needs. Sex with other masculine men also helped many participants relieve the everyday pressures of masculinity. Experiencing sexual pleasure without having to be in control allowed them to release masculinity-related pressures and continue on in their everyday lives much as before. Thus, by having sex with men—usually not compatible with normative masculinity—some participants were able to satisfy non-sexual needs and temporarily relieve the pressures of masculinity. This allowed them to continue their straight, masculine lives otherwise uninterrupted.

## CHAPTER IV

### “JUST HELPIN’ A BUDDY OUT”

An alcoholic drinks, but everyone that drinks is not an alcoholic. So my philosophy is, every gay person does this, but not everybody that does this is gay. And so you had to separate what was gay and what wasn't. I think a lot of it is all in your mind. If you're not gay, and you don't feel that you are, then it's not a gay thing. It's just helpin' a buddy out... In your mind you're thinking, you're not gay, you're just helping somebody out. This poor guy, he's married, his wife won't do it. So if his wife won't do him, we're just friends, we're buddies, we're not in a big crowd, there's not a bunch of people around, we'll just help you out. My wife doesn't do things, girls for some reason, you run into a lot of girls that don't do blowjobs, they just don't. And so because I'd never had one before, I thought it was interesting to try it. Of course I'd never done one before, so it was interesting to try that as well. But basically it was, well, if your wife won't do it, come, I'll do it, or my wife won't do it, then we'll get together and just do it together. And so, I guess in my mind, I wasn't thinking this is a gay thing, this is just, I'm just helping my friend out. He just needs some helpin', he's helpin' me out, and once it's over with it wasn't like call the next day, “oh, how are you,” no, it was over. ‘Til the next time. It was over, they call it NSA now, no strings attached, so it was a no strings attached thing. (Mike, 50, rural Illinois)

Participants engaged in what I call *bud-sex*. This is sex with particular gender and sexual meanings specific to rural, white, straight MSM. Sexual practices have no inherent meanings. Instead, how individuals perceive them differs across populations and contexts. While the sex participants have may appear to be similar to that of gay and bisexual men, the meanings they attach to it differ greatly. Bud-sex minimizes the importance of male-male sex for participants' identities, thus allowing them to perceive it as compatible with heterosexuality and masculinity. Gay and bisexual men, on the other hand, perceive their sex as deeply tied to their identities. Their sex both reflects and reinforces their gayness or bisexuality. Thus, while both straight and gay or bisexual men may enjoy putting penises in their mouths, for instance, how they interpret it has vastly different implications for their identities.

Bud-sex involves three main components: hooking up with guys like themselves; interpreting male-male sex as largely unthreatening to their masculinity, heterosexuality, and marriage; and having secretive, non-romantic sex. Participants chose hookup partners much like themselves: masculine, white, and/or straight or bisexual. Doing so helped the encounter feel more “normal” and thus compatible with heterosexuality and masculinity (see also Ward 2015). Additionally, many formed unique interpretations of sex with men as “helpin’ a buddy out” or acting on “urges.” By perceiving sex with men in these ways, participants felt they could relieve distracting desires without affecting other parts of their life. They also rejected mainstream associations between sex with men on one hand, and gayness and femininity on the other. By doing so, they formed unique interpretations of sex with men as neither gay nor feminine. Reflecting their alignment with rural straight culture, they also viewed sex with men as less threatening to their marriages than sex with women. This preserved a part of their lives they saw as key to their identities as rural, straight, masculine men. Lastly, participants made sure their encounters remained secretive and non-romantic. All these components helped them feel that their sex with men was compatible with both masculinity and heterosexuality.

Bud-sex—and the particular gender and sexual meanings embedded within it—both reflects and reinforces participants’ alignment with straight culture. What is central to sexual identity and gender is individuals’ interpretations of sexual practices, not sexual practices in and of themselves. These interpretations, in turn, both reflect and reinforce alignment with some sexual cultures over others. For the straight men in this project, their interpretations both reflected and reinforced their alignment with straight culture. Bud-

sex is a unique approach to male-male sex that threatens neither heterosexuality nor masculinity for the men who engage in it.

### *Guys Like Myself*

Most participants had sex with men like themselves: masculine, white, and/or straight or secretly bisexual. Having sex with similar men was not happenstance. This is key to bud-sex. Partnering with similar men helped make the encounter seem more normal, and thus compatible with straightness and masculinity. Having sex with men like themselves also reflects their alignment with rural straight culture. Men who were white, masculine, and not-gay reflected the composition of the rural networks and straight communities in which participants found comfort and belonging. Sexually partnering with men unlike themselves and unlike the men in their social contexts would have seemed more out of place and thus threatening to their identities. The same structures and institutions that encouraged their masculinity and heterosexuality (Chapter II) also helped shape their desires for masculine, straight men. Hooking up mostly with white, masculine, and not-gay men helped them feel more secure in their heterosexuality and masculinity. Many participants stated that they did not care about the sexual identity or race of sexual participants, yet their practices suggest otherwise.

On sensitive topics such as sexual partnering preferences, it is instructive to examine both practices and stated preferences. Indeed, many participants likely did not state preferences for race or sexual identity because they did not want to sound racist or



homophobic.<sup>11</sup> Here I mostly examine preferences for masculine and straight men, as I examined preferences for whiteness in Chapter II. Overall, 26 participants stated preferences specifically for other straight or bisexual white masculine men; 11 stated preferences for two of those characteristics; and 21 stated preferences for one of those characteristics (usually masculinity). Only two stated preferences for gay, feminine, men of color. In term of what they *actually* did, 35 reported that a majority of their male sexual partners were straight or bisexual white masculine men; 19 reported that a majority had two of those characteristics; 5 reported that a majority had one of those characteristics; and just one reported that a majority of their male sexual partners had none of these characteristics (i.e., were gay feminine men of color). Thus, in practice, most participants hooked up with men like themselves a majority of the time. Almost all had sex with men that shared two of three characteristics related to race, gender expression, and sexual identity a majority of the time. It is impossible to know participants' exact sexual partnering histories, especially with regards to sexual identity, given that many encounters were brief and sometimes involved little conversation. For the purpose of understanding bud-sex, though, it does not matter. If participants felt like their sexual partners were bisexual or straight, for instance, this helped put them at ease. Being with men like themselves helped make the encounter seem more “normal” to them and reminiscent of rural masculine male bonding.

The vast majority of participants—51—stated preferences for hooking up with other masculine men, and 53 hooked up with masculine men a majority of the time. This was even the case for the participants that did not report attractions to men. Masculinity

---

<sup>11</sup> Even among participants who did state preferences, they often followed up with statements like “but I’m not racist” or “that’s just my preference.” This suggests that many participants were concerned how they came across to me in the interview.

was perhaps the most important element of participants' partnering practices. Few participants preferred feminine men. The participants' narratives illustrate historical shifts to the relationship between gender and sexuality. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many masculine men penetrated feminine men without feeling as though their masculinity or sexual identity was threatened. This is because *gender and sexual practice* (i.e., penetrating or being penetrated) was an organizing element for how sexuality was understood, and the concept of sexual identity was not yet widely used (Chauncey 1994). Today, the *biological sex* of sexual partners is the organizing element for sexuality, and for men there is a widespread perception that femininity is tied to same-sex sexuality. Men that engage in bud-sex distance themselves from femininity. They normalize their sexual encounters as masculine and compatible with heterosexuality in part by partnering with other normatively masculine men.

Participants stated that for gender expression, what was most important was that a man be "normal" in masculinity: that is, not feminine. While participants had a wide range of physical preferences, most defined masculinity in terms of mannerisms, demeanor, clothing choices, hair style, and voice rather than body build. For instance, Mike and Mark assured me that even though I am slim, they also perceive me as masculine, and thus would be interested to have sex with me.<sup>12</sup> Many stated that if they wanted to have sex with someone feminine, they could simply have sex with their women partners. Most desired the gender binary. Jack, for instance, explained that he prefers masculine men and feminine women:

Totally masculine, I'm not into femininity at all. I mean that's what I got women for, in my mind. It's a turn off to me, femininity in a man is a turn off. That's what

---

<sup>12</sup> See the Methodological Appendix for more on how I navigated these situations and politely declined all such offers.

attracts me to men, the masculinity. And it's a turn off in a woman if she's masculine. So, a masculine man is what turns me on... I like hair, I don't like shaven anywhere, but I don't like so furry that they're a gorilla or somethin', there's a sweet spot in there, but definitely shaved nuts or whatever does not do anything for me. I like the deep voice of a man, I like legs, nice hairy legs, just masculinity all the way around. I don't know for sure how to answer that.

Jack preferred feminine women and masculine men. Jeremy, too, stated that “I either want to be with a woman or I want to be with a man. I don't want to be with a man who exhibits extreme feminine characteristics.” Thus, although there are many men and women with a range of gender expressions that challenge the gender binary, participants were not interested in them. Instead, they preferred very masculine men or very feminine women. Any trait that suggested male femininity was undesirable. This meant paying attention to how men carried themselves, as George described:

I don't want a sissy femme guy at all... Somebody that has more of those tendencies where, you can tell from when you look at somebody whether they're more masculine kind of guy versus more of a femme kind of guy, the way they talk, the way they walk, the way they act, things like that. I'm not talkin' about whether they're into sports or not... I'm just talkin' about the way they carry themselves.

George did not care about interests as much as actions and appearance when considering a potential male sexual partner. Mutual interests were important if a hookup partner could become a FWB, but for one-time hookups and purely sexual relationships masculine mannerisms were what mattered. Larry echoed what many participants found desirable in men: someone who was “very masculine. Just demeanor, I am attracted definitely to someone that's not chiseled, they don't have to have a perfect body, they don't have to be manscaped, I like just good ‘ol hard working type guys, not gross or sloppy by any stretch, but I definitely am attracted to more of a man's man type of person.” Participants

did not seek men who spent hours working out at the gym. Instead, they preferred men who were masculine in appearance and demeanor.

Many participants even expressed discomfort about feminine men. As Ryan shared,

We've all met flamers, men or boys that just act like they're really uncomfortable bein' guys, and they want to overact as female. Visually [that's] the way I see it. And have a certain kind of talk, and very effeminate mannerisms. And, masculinity's what attracts me, not that... I'm not comfortable around femme.

Ryan, like other participants, felt that feminine men were “acting” and that masculine men were not. This suggests that masculine men behave naturally, like “normal” men, and feminine men act unnaturally, and should thus be avoided. While numerous participants explained that they felt uncomfortable around feminine men, a handful elaborated on this and gave specific reasons why. Marcus, for instance, felt that feminine men would become too emotionally attached:

It's hard to explain. But I would say, a guy that I would consider more like me, that just gets blowjobs from guys every once in a while, doesn't do it everyday. And I know that there are a lot of guys out there that are like me. They're manly guys, and doing manly stuff, and just happen to have oral sex with men every once in a while [laughs]. So, that's why I kinda prefer those types of guys... It seems that, in my mind, that a more masculine guy wouldn't harass me, I guess, hound me all the time, send me a 1000 emails, 'hey, you want to get together today, hey what about today, hey what about now.' And there's a thought in my head that a more feminine or gay guy would want, want me to come around more.

Marcus and others considered femininity non-negotiable in part because of the potential for feminine man to become too emotionally attached. Desires to avoid feminine men stemmed from preferences for men like themselves and caution to avoid potential emotional attachment, echoing their wariness about hooking up with women.

Many participants specifically described a *rural* masculinity that they found attractive. As Cain said, “I’m really not drawn to what I would consider really effeminate faggot types.” He explained the type of guy he likes through an example:

I did hook up with one 20 year-old guy, and we met at a little convenience store. He wanted me to get in his truck with him. Nobody would ever suspect that this dude would like to play with guys. And he’s got like a shotgun hanging in his truck, in the rack, and he’s a hunter type, and he in fact was dressed in like camo, kind of stuff. And so what we did, we drove to a graveyard in town that was remote, and we sucked each other off in his truck. I had him over to the house before. But again, he’s that rugged, twenty year old guy, oh, fuckin’ 8" [cock], and he has black hair. And I’m trying to think if he has blue eyes, which that’s also a big turn on to me, if a guy has blue eyes.

Cain preferred young, masculine, white men, who could demonstrate their masculinity through markers of rurality (e.g., hunting). As Dan also shared,

I would say more masculine... The outdoors kind of guy, man's kind of man, that likes to do man things, hunting and fishing and things of that nature that point towards a male, masculine man... I would prefer somebody of my own kind of persuasion, of more masculine activities, more outwardly looking, acting masculine and performing in that way in everyday activity.

Even though Dan and other participants were not seeking to romantically partner with a man, many nonetheless preferred a man with hobbies and dispositions that reflected a rural masculinity. This reflected, in part, many participants’ openness to forming sexual friendships with men. Mutual interests were important when there was potential for a sexual friendship. That is one reason Bob preferred masculine men who enjoyed rural hobbies:

He would be masculine. Very much so... Just in appearance, in his attitude, in demeanor, knowing what they want and not pussy-footin' around about things. Kind of a take charge kind of person... Outdoors man, I like to go swimmin', kayakin'. I love to hunt, love to fish, somebody that I can do those things with and not have it all be about the sex. Someone, what you do in the daytime is what people see one way and then when the lights go out, it's a whole complete different ballgame. But I just like the outdoorsy kind. I don't like these guys that sit around and play computer games and all that crap all day long, and bitching,

complaining, that gripe worse than a bunch of ol' widow women, "you see the way that bitch did this," and then that gets back into those guys that are kind of flamers, they're like "oh, Charles, did you see the way he was dressed? That's just totally gaaay." And that's just the way they talk, what in the fuck, nobody talks like that, that's just a stereotype and some people run with it. Maybe it works for them, I don't know, but it don't work for me, to me it's a huge turn off. I got to go the other direction when I see that kind of stuff happenin', I'm like no... Guys I hooked up with about women, we don't even talk about that, women are never part of the equation. It's all about huntin' and fishin' and fuckin' [laughs]. That's the way [my FWB] explained it, he said that's the way I am too, it's all about fishin', huntin', and fuckin', and not necessarily in that order [laughs].

Bob preferred to have sex with friends, and ones that had a particular type of rural masculinity and enjoyed rural activities. As he said about one FWB, "he's a redneck. He's a cattle farmer with his dad and his uncle, he does all that outdoors stuff... huntin' and fishin'. He's masculine in every way." Many of the participants that described themselves using elements of rurality also preferred that in potential sexual partners. Many sought rural, white, masculine, and not-gay male sexual partners, reflecting both their own characteristics and that of the networks and communities to which they belonged.

When explaining preferences for masculine men, many participants conflated masculinity with heterosexuality—just as they did when describing themselves, as we saw in Chapter II. For instance, Joey's preferred type of male sexual partner was reflected in his most recent one at the time of the interview: "very much heterosexual. He had a pickup and a fishing boat and a family, [and] it's kind of cliché but certainly masculine, there would be no indication from his mannerisms that he was gay or had any kind of bisexual nature." For Joey and others, masculinity and heterosexuality overlapped considerably. Relatedly, Paul shared that he preferred a man who was "either straight or bi" because "I typically think of a gay man as the swishy feminine, and that's not what I want. If I want feminine I'll have a female." Many participants acknowledged that gay

men could be masculine, but nonetheless discussed preferred sexual partners as though femininity and gayness were almost identical.

Relatedly, 35 participants stated that they preferred straight or bisexual male partners, and 40 reported that a majority of their partners were straight or bisexual. This is remarkable. Weighted estimates from the nationally representative 2013-2015 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG)—surveying men 15-44 in the US—indicate that 58% of men who had sex with men in the year prior to the survey identified as gay. Only about 8.2% of American men have had sex with another man in their lives (Twenge, Sherman, and Wells 2016), and a far smaller percentage have had sex with a man in the past 12 months: only 2.2%, according to weighted NSFG estimates. Thus, for participants who reported that a majority of their sexual partners identified as straight or bisexual, there was likely strategy involved. Many of the participants who hooked up with gay men did so for three main reasons. First, as numerous participants lamented, they had difficulties finding straight or bisexual sexual partners—especially in rural areas. Second, a small subset of the sample reported that they preferred gay men because they were better at giving sexual partners sexual pleasure, and/or because gay men were more secure in their sexuality and gender expression than straight or bisexual men. This in turn helped them feel more comfortable. Third, and relatedly, the other person’s masculinity and/or whiteness helped participants feel more comfortable in the encounter. This helped to compensate for their sexual partner’s gayness. Key reasons participants reported preferring straight or bisexual men included associating gayness with femininity, the potential for emotional attachment, threats to secrecy, and/or feeling more comfortable around straight or bisexual men than gay men. Many participants felt that because

straight and bisexual men were interested in and/or partnered with women, they were closely aligned with straight culture. Characteristics indicating alignment with straight culture, including sexual identity and relationships with women, were key.

For this reason, the sexual identity of hookup partners was a central element of bud-sex. Having a wife or woman partner was an indicator of this, and helped guarantee discretion. As Cain stated, “well, I like the masculine looking guy who maybe is more bi.” As he noted when discussing a recent sexual partner, “he mentioned having a girlfriend, and that's kind of a type that I would find more appealing to me.” He felt more comfortable around these types of men:

I'm not out, and so someone who is out, I'm sometimes a little bit hesitant about what they may say to others or talk. Because somebody else down low is probably gonna be a bit more respectful and not out somebody... and again if they're very effeminate I'm probably not going to be attracted... I'm slightly more turned on if I know it's a straight or married dude, particularly if they're younger... I'm thinking the kind of guy that's lookin' for a man and woman is gonna be more of a masculine kind of a guy. And he's not the effeminate type... I typically like to be around guys that also have women in their lives. They're down low, it's kind of a boys club kind of a thing, it's not like the effeminate gay club, I don't know how to describe it, but that's kind of where I am.

Cain felt straight and bisexual men were more masculine, more comfortable company, and better able to keep a secret than gay men. His statement about them being in a “boys club” suggests the extent to which he sees himself and these other men as belonging to a similar community. Many participants echoed these themes. As Jack described,

He would be in the same boat as me. He would be straight, preferably married or definitely partnered up with a female, with one thing on his mind, getting' his rocks off with me... they are in the same boat as me, and they're not gonna out me, and that is very important to me. In the society I live in, these are very very hidden, deep feelings that nobody knows about. So I feel more secure with a married man because of that very reason, because that's all they want, just to get off with me and then go back to their lifestyle like it never happened.



Assurance of secrecy was key for Jack, as was preventing romantic attachment. Men in a similar situation as himself were likely looking for the same sexual and emotional dynamic. As Brian similarly indicated,

I don't really want some guy callin' me at all hours of the night or somethin' like that. If the guy's married, then that's his first commitment... I think like me, they like jerkin off and then goin' on their way. I wouldn't say all 3 of them would march in a Pride parade or go to a gay club or somethin' along those lines, I think all 3 like me are just trying to bust a nut since the wife's not doin' their job... I'm married, they're married, that just about virtually guarantees secrecy. Nobody wants a divorce.

Brian desired married men like himself, both to maintain secrecy and avoid unwanted emotional attachment. Like others, Brian felt that feminine and/or gay men would be far too likely to become attached and perhaps even ruin his marriage. Even though many gay men enjoy casual sex, participants felt as though they were likely to become emotionally attached and should thus be avoided.

Others indicated a preference for bisexual or straight men because they were more comfortable company. Given that openly gay men were not widespread in their rural social contexts or networks, participants were not used to interacting with them and did not necessarily understand them. They preferred to hook up with men who had a similar worldview and disposition. As Marcus described,

I don't think that I've ever met up with anybody that considered themselves gay at all. I prefer either straight or somebody that calls themselves bi... Straight guys, I think I identify with them more because that's kinda [how] I feel myself. And bi guys, the same way. We can talk about women or, there's been times where we've watched hetero porn before we got started or whatever, so I kinda prefer that... I'm not attracted, it's very off-putting when somebody acts gay. And I feel like a lot of gay guys just kinda put off that gay vibe, I'll call it, I guess, and that's very off-putting to me... I'm kind of talking about those people that you see and you don't have to hear them talk, you just look at 'em and you know that guy's gay... I would say that they definitely look more feminine than a bi guy, I mean a straight or bi guy.

Marcus was uncomfortable around gay men because of their “gay vibe” and felt that they were usually feminine. He and others preferred men who were similar to themselves in cultural alignment and disposition, which meant men who identified as straight or bisexual—especially ones partnered to women. Participants felt that this meant sexual partners would perceive and respond to the world, and sexual encounters, similarly.

These types of men would not have a gay vibe. As Joe stated,

Like me, he'd be open. He wouldn't be gay, he wouldn't obviously be gay, he'd be saying look, here it is, take it, that's as far as I can take it... [I prefer] bisexual because he would be of the same mind that I am. He would understand what I'm feeling, and would respond probably similarly. So we could engage with common knowledge, that's why.

Joe preferred straight and bisexual men because they were similar to himself in terms of masculinity, emotional availability, and cultural alignment. They “would be of the same mind.” Many of the participants who met their sexual partners online asked them their sexual identities before proceeding with meeting. Ian, for instance, noted that “usually one of the questions I ask is like, do you think of yourself as gay, straight, bi, somethin’ else. Just to help get an idea of what this person is about, how this person picks, what this person gets into.” One reason he did so is because he prefers men who are “probably similar to me, maybe possibly bisexual, but that's kind of pushing it. Mostly straight.”

Joey similarly explained that “I'd be looking for a similar kind of guy who doesn't do this a lot but on occasion with another as I say sane, married, or divorced guy, but a man who has identified all his life as heterosexual.” Participants often preferred men who only occasionally hooked up with other men outside their marriage or partnership to a woman. While participants preferred guys similar to themselves for sexual friendships, this often also extended to one-time hookups or purely sexual relationships. They usually felt much

more comfortable with men who identified as straight or bisexual, especially if they were partnered to a woman. Participants felt that these types of men would have a similar worldview and way of engaging in sexual encounters.

Several participants stated that they preferred to hook up with men like themselves in ways that reflected masculinity, sexual identity, and/or race, but were more directly about rurality. Mike, for instance, preferred rural men. He noted that he has bareback sex with his sexual partners, without asking for STI tests, in part because he feels that their rural social context discourages them from other risky sexual behavior:

I can pretty well feel people out. And when I have phone conversations and I ask questions or I'm texting or whatever the case is, and I ask questions and stuff, I don't feel that they would have any reason to lie. It all depends on where you're from, if you're comin' from the city, absolutely not. Cuz if you're up in the city, there's all kinds of opportunities and all kinds of things goin' on, God only knows what you're involved in. And things like that... I don't just go, when I talk with guys and stuff like that I don't just, I set it in advance. You don't just call me and say 'hey, let's do it,' and I leave and do it. No sir, I have conversations, I have text messages, I say call me, and things like that because I want to hear your voice. And sometimes I know you can hear it in a person's voice, and different things like that. When I found a bunch of country boys, [laughs], a bunch of rednecks and country boys here in Southern Illinois is what you deal with. And, honestly, they're too stupid to do other things [laughs]. They are, they're too stupid to think of that stuff, even. So, no, I'm never worried about that... That's why I get with these guys, these country boys, they ain't partying with nobody.

Mike felt that sex with other rural men was vastly safer than with urban men. By definition, the rural men who topped him bareback had risky sex just as he imagined city dwellers did. Nonetheless, he felt more comfortable with rural men because he considered other straight, white, masculine, rural men to be safer than other types of men.

In sum, the majority of participants hooked up with and/or stated preferences for men like themselves: masculine, white, and straight or secretly bisexual. Hooking up with men who were similar to themselves, and common in their communities and networks,

reflected their comfort in rural, white, straight culture. Hooking up with men who they felt were similarly aligned with it helped assure them that the encounter would remain secretive, no emotional bonds would form, and they could have a fairly straightforward sexual encounter. Having sex with other white, masculine, and straight or secretly bisexual men helped make the encounter feel more normal and, thus, compatible with masculinity and heterosexuality. Overall, partnering with other similar men was a key element of bud-sex and helped render male-male sex as compatible with straightness and masculinity. The same sex acts have very different meanings depending on the context and people involved.

*Sex with Men: Straight, Masculine, and Helping Marital Bliss*

In this section I address three related but distinct interpretive elements of bud-sex. First is interpreting sex with men as “helpin’ a buddy out” or acting on “urges.” Second is viewing penetration practices as unthreatening to masculinity or straightness. Third is interpreting sex with men as less threatening to their marriages or partnerships with women than extramarital sex with women. Combined, all three show how participants rejected mainstream associations of male-male sex as gay, feminine, or incompatible with marriage. For rural, white, straight men who have bud-sex, sex with men is not threatening to their heterosexuality or masculinity, nor is it too problematic for their marriages. Indeed, sex with men may even be necessary to address desires that would otherwise be distracting. Thus, counter-intuitively, *men who have bud-sex view sex with men as unthreatening to their identities and marriages, and perhaps even necessary to maintain them.*

*“Helpin’ a buddy out” and acting on “urges”*

A central element of bud-sex is unique gender and sexual interpretations of sex with men. Sex with men is not just a way to act on attractions or desires. Instead, it is “just helpin’ a buddy out,” as Mike’s quote at the beginning of this chapter illustrates. Or it is a way to act on uncontrollable, unwanted “urges” or “impulses.” These interpretations bolstered participants’ sense of themselves as straight, masculine men. Especially for those that reported attractions to men, interpreting sex with men in highly complicated ways made it seem reasonable and even necessary for straight, masculine men to engage in same-sex sex to address some need or desire. Both themes involve an interpretation of sex with men as a form of masculine, heterosexual bonding. Whether by “helpin’ a buddy out” or relieving “urges,” participants and their male sexual partners assisted one another in addressing sexual desires without affecting any other parts of their lives. Indeed, many felt that *they had to have sex with men to maintain their heterosexuality and masculinity*. Doing so relieved desires and allowed them to continue being devoted family men.

Many agreed with Mike that sex with men was “just helpin’ a buddy out,” and thus a form of straight, masculine, male-male bonding. “Helpin’ a buddy out” allowed participants to satisfy male-male desires in a normatively masculine way without affecting their marriages or other parts of their lives. Most participants enjoyed sexually pleasing their sexual partners, but only 9 expressed this in a specific “helpin’ your buddy out” framework. As Mike elaborated, “it wasn’t like, I’m attracted to you. I’m attracted to this, I’m attracted to that, it was just more of a get together and just guys bein’ guys.” Relatedly, Cain shared that “I realize that this is an impulse that I have, and that I try to

keep it in check. And I'm thinking an occasional bud or whatever to help me out, is what I need.” Cain also reported enjoying helping other men: “what I've found of late is that I've really kinda drawn into the DILF [dad I'd like to fuck] kind of a role. Where [I am] particularly interested in kinda helpin' college guys explore. And so that's been kind of interesting to me.” He also explained that “it was after I got married that I found myself being drawn in and attracted more so to maybe guys helpin' each other out.” This makes sense: it was after he was married that he was in particular need of a bud to help him relieve his desires without affecting his marriage. Bob, similarly, explained that “growin' up in a rural community, it was help your buddy out kind of thing, nobody's lookin', and it was all kept under wraps, and nobody knew anything.” For several participants, sex with men was a masculine bonding experience that allowed them to act on their desires in a normatively masculine way without affecting any other parts of either man's life.

A subset of participants—many of whom were highly religious—considered sex with men a way to act on uncontrollable, unwanted “urges.” Taking care of these urges with another man helped them suppress distracting desires. Thus, satisfying urges with other men allowed both to continue their lives otherwise uninterrupted. While similar to helpin' a buddy out, interpreting sex with men as acting on an urge frames male-male sex as highly problematic but necessary. In this framework, counter-intuitively, having sex with trusted men was critical so that urges could be adequately addressed. Bud-sex involves unique interpretations that seem contradictory, but in fact render male-male sex as compatible with heterosexuality and masculinity. Cain described sex with men as “taking care of the urge or the need of the day.” He continued, explaining that “they're more, just satisfying needs. It's almost like sometimes, even if I jerk off just watchin'

porn, or get off with someone, it's like now this is out of the way, now I can get my work done. It's almost like a chore, kind of a thing.” Cain found sex with men pleasurable, but also necessary so he could continue being a good husband and father. Ryan similarly explained that,

I definitely am compartmentalized, and that part of me that acts out on those urges is different than the other part of me. And I don't have classic split personality tendencies, but it's remarkable how we're two different people... But if I go out and cruise at noontime and find somebody that I can have a quick encounter with, that's just, me getting my urge taken care of.

Ryan reported some of the most conflict about his sexual practices. By addressing his “urges,” he was able to continue being a good husband and father. Many participants who interpreted sex with men as acting on urges also felt that there were two different parts of themselves. Sex with women was different than sex with men, and had nothing to do with relieving urges. As Jeff explained, “I guess sexual relationships with my wife are about unity and passion, and they take a long time, and they're about fulfilling each other's needs. Whereas sex with men is strictly about my own needs, and I suppose I make sure the other guy gets off as a courtesy, but it's mostly about urges.” Whereas sex with women partners was intimate and meaningful to their identity, sex with men was just not. Like other participants, Dan explained that his urges do not define his everyday life:

I'm not looking for men when I'm out and about, I don't look at men, I'm not searching for that kind of person or even really thinking about it during the day. I don't know, it's kind of like an urge or something that I have, and I want to do that, engage in, with another man... it's not at the forefront of my everyday thinking.

Sex with men was not a defining part of Dan's life or any of the other participants' lives. It was simply necessary every once in a while. As Lance explained, “I guess I feel the urge over time and after a couple of months goes by, I finally give into it.” For several

participants, many of them highly religious, desires for men were unwanted urges with only one solution: sex with men. Finding another understanding man to help relieve these urges in a masculine way, and in a way that would not threaten other parts of their lives, was key to maintaining their heterosexuality and masculinity.

Overall, many participants interpreted sex with men in highly complicated ways: as “helpin’ a buddy out” and/or eliminating “urges.” Both of these frameworks were part of the set of unique gender and sexual interpretations that defined bud-sex. By interpreting sex with men in these ways, participants framed it as necessary and thus compatible with heterosexuality and masculinity. Both involved masculine bonding with men, and both framed sex with men as distracting or problematic but necessary. By connecting with men similar to themselves, participants were able to address their desires in a normatively masculine way without affecting any other parts of their lives. While seemingly contradictory, this allowed them to continue to maintain their heterosexuality and masculinity. Counter-intuitively, *having male-male sex with these understandings helped preserve their heterosexuality and masculinity.*

#### *Sex with men: Neither gay nor feminine*

The second set of unique interpretations that defined bud-sex involved sexual and gender interpretations of penetration practices. By rejecting the associations between sex with men and gayness or femininity, participants were able to reinforce their masculinity and heterosexuality. Participants had a wide range of sexual preferences. Of the 60, 57 had oral sex, 32 had anal sex, and 3 almost exclusively mutually masturbated with male sexual partners. Of the 32 men who had anal sex more than a handful of times, 10 mostly



bottomed, 10 were versatile, and 12 mostly topped. All but 20 men reciprocated in oral and/or anal sex in at least some encounters. Of those who did not usually reciprocate, 7 did not have anal sex, 5 mostly bottomed, 2 were versatile (topping and bottoming different men), and 6 mostly topped. Thus, there was a fairly even distribution of penetration preferences. No participants questioned their own masculinity or straightness when another man penetrated their mouth or anus. Only 14 participants felt that their penetration practices had some associations with femininity and/or gayness.<sup>13</sup> For most of them, this represented a temporary feeling associated with a pleasurable sexual practice. This did not affect how they saw themselves as straight, masculine men. Few considered their penetration practices as especially meaningful to their identity or that of their sexual partners. What was critical to their masculinity and heterosexuality was not *what* participants did sexually, but *how* they did it. This is a defining feature of bud-sex. Sex with men was pleasurable, but it did not threaten their masculinity or heterosexuality.

The vast majority of participants did not associate their sex practices with either femininity or gayness, and did not give it much thought. For most, penetration was simply an opportunity for pleasure. As David shared,

I know that some people do, they view it as the guy doing the fucking is the bull and the other one is something else. But personally I don't see it that way at all, it's a mutual sexual satisfaction, however you get it. I don't feel any less of a man if I'm bent over and he's in me, at all. I just don't.

David enjoyed bottoming with his gay FWB, and this did not affect how he saw himself. Although aware of stereotypical associations between being penetrated and femininity, David rejected this interpretation and formed his own. Bob did as well. He liked masculine men to top him, but did not feel less masculine even though other people

---

<sup>13</sup> Here I focus on participants' thoughts about their own practices. For instance, I do not analyze men's thoughts about anal sex if they had not experienced it.

might: “that's one of the things that I kinda even in my own mind kinda find weird [laughs]. This is more of a girly thing to be doin’, but that never enters my mind. I don't think I'm any less by any one of those acts.” Matt felt similarly, and stated simply “I see it in movies, I don't know. And then they switch, so neither one is basically the feminine one... I just think it's hot, that's all.” For several participants, including Matt, gay male porn helped them see sex in terms of pleasure rather than identity. Many provided short, straightforward answers, reflecting their nonchalance about their sexual practices. For instance, Jose simply said “No. I just feel like it's something that I'm interested in. It doesn't bother me at all.” Billy, similarly, shared “I don't think it makes any [difference] one way or the other. I never thought of it.” Participants’ penetration practices reflected their sexual tastes at any given time, and were not meaningful for how they understood themselves as men. As Connor explained, “I think of it as more of a pleasure thing” rather than an expression of his identity. Jordan also explained that “I find that very masculine men including myself love to give, and we love to receive [laughs]. I think for a lot of people it doesn't have anything to do with masculinity or femininity at all.” Given that participants perceived themselves as masculine and preferred to have sex with other masculine men, they also interpreted penetration practices as neither gay nor feminine. Echoing this, Travis stated that penetration is “just part of the sex. I don't think it puts, I don't think it makes you feel one way or the other, it's just a part of getting off.” Sean also stated that “when I have been penetrated I don't feel like any less of a man afterwards.” Sex with men was simply a pursuit of pleasure, and they did not feel that particular acts had meanings associated with gayness or femininity. Similarly, Ernie shared that being penetrated is not related to femininity because he engaged in similar practices with his

wife: “I consider myself very masculine but I love to suck cock... I've had my wife use a dildo on me before, it doesn't make me feel less masculine so I don't why it would be any different otherwise.” Relatedly, Brandon felt that giving oral to a man was similar to giving oral to a woman: “I do the same thing to women is kind of how I see it. I wouldn't say I feel less straight when I'm doing it.” Participants not only divorced penetration from associations between femininity and gayness, but also likened giving and receiving between two men as similar to that between a man and a woman. Similarly, Zach noted that “I don't think it's an either or, I think that it's just part of what you do in the process of enjoying one another and it's just part of the act.” Zach did not find penetration concerning or meaningful for how he understood himself. Adam also shared that,

I don't necessarily see either one whether you're passive or active, it's just a matter of self-gratification and if you are gratifying someone. It's just, it's a mutual feeling that you share in the fact of the enjoyment of it. So it's like I love making my wife happy sexually and I have no problem making a guy feel good sexually. So I don't see either one being feminine or masculine, it's just gratification... [and] I don't see it in terms of straight or gay or anything else.

Adam felt that sex, no matter what form, was just a matter of pleasure. Most participants did not view their penetration practices as especially meaningful for their sexual identity or masculinity. Instead, they felt that their practices were simply a way to experience sexual pleasure.

In sum, what was key for participants was not *what* they did sexually, but *how*. Most participants did not associate their penetration practices with femininity or gayness. Of the minority who did, most viewed the feeling of femininity or gayness as temporary (i.e., in the moment) and not meaningful for how they perceived their straight identity or masculinity. These interpretations helped them render their sex practices as compatible with heterosexuality and masculinity. Bud-sex involves viewing sex with men as fun, and

perhaps even necessary to address desires, but not threatening to masculinity or heterosexuality. Sex was simply a pursuit of sexual pleasure, not an expression of gender or sexual identity. Participants identified as straight and masculine and often preferred men like that as well. Thus, it follows suit that they would interpret their sexual practices in ways that would reinforce these identities rather than challenge them.

*Not cheating: Extramarital sex with men*

This is the last of the three main themes that relate to the interpretive aspects of bud-sex. By viewing sex with men as less threatening to marriages than sex with women, men who have bud-sex preserve their sense of themselves as good husbands. This is particularly important given that marriage is a key aspect of rural straight culture. Indeed, participants took genuine pleasure in their relationships with women. Of the 39 men who were currently in relationships with women, 36 considered extramarital sex with men to be not cheating or less threatening than extramarital sex with women. Broken down by relationship status, 33 of 34 married men felt this way, as compared to 3 of 5 men in non-marital relationships with women. Participants in monogamous relationships knew that their partners would not approve of them having sex with men, so they kept it secretive. Only two participants, Joe and Rex, were in open relationships with women.

There were two interrelated reasons why participants perceived sex with men as less threatening to their marriages than sex with women. The main one is that they felt that sex with men did not involve the potential for emotional attachment, whereas sex with women did. Thus, they felt that sex with men would not threaten their marriages, unlike extramarital sex with women. Participants sought sexual pleasure with men, but

not a relationship that could affect their partnerships to women. Relatedly, many felt that their wives losing interest in sex left them no choice but to have extramarital sex. Sex with men was a compromise: participants whose wives no longer wanted to have sex were able to experience sexual pleasure without the potential for emotional involvement with women. Participants expressed varying degrees of guilt about having extramarital sex, but nonetheless felt that sex with men was less threatening to their marriages than sex with women. Chapter II detailed how participants perceived marriage as central to what it meant to be a rural, straight, masculine man. So, by perceiving extramarital sex with men as not cheating or as less threatening to their marriages than sex with women, participants helped to preserve their straightness and masculinity.

Several participants stated that sex with men was not cheating or was less threatening than sex with women because it did not involve romantic attachment. They were simply looking for sex, and they had no plans to develop a relationship with a man that may affect their marriage. Given their beliefs that women may become emotionally attached to them—or they may become emotionally attached to women—they felt that sex with women posed a risk to their marriages that sex with men did not. For instance, Peter explained that “I guess I would say I view it differently because I would never hookup with another woman while I was married. I think it's because that would seem, I couldn't do that very casually... that just feels like I'm looking for a relationship and not sex.” Peter, like others, feared the potential for romantic attachment to women. As Marcus similarly shared, “I like to think that if I was with a girl I would be cheating, but if I was givin' a guy a blowjob, that's not that big of a deal. It's a guy, there's no emotional attraction or nothing emotional there at all.” Tom also explained that “I really

don't think about it. For me, being romantic and emotional is more cheating than just havin' sex." This was especially the case because "I kinda think of it as, I'm married to a nun," necessitating sex elsewhere. Jack, who was divorced for reasons unrelated to sex with men, reflected on years of hooking up with men during marriage:

I do not view it as cheating. Except for when emotion should happen to be involved, and maybe that's the fear that I had with my buddy that I called it off. If we had been getting to develop feelings, then yes, it would have been cheating. If it was with a woman, if I was having an affair with a woman on the side while being married, I absolutely would call it cheating. But with a man to me, it's more just physical, get your nut off, and go on. Never see him again, so no, I do not believe it's cheating, in the situation, in the context that there's no emotion involved, I do not think it's cheating.

Sex with men was not cheating for Jack because it *usually* did not involve emotion.

Chapter V, however, shows how Jack and other participants did emotion work by putting emotional boundaries between themselves and their close male sexual friends. While participants stated that sex with men naturally involved no emotional attachment, many actually took steps to prevent romantic bonds from forming that could have affected their partnerships with women. In any case, numerous participants felt that because they were not going to leave their wives, sex with men was fairly irrelevant to their marriages. As Cain shared, "I think one way I have resolved it is that I'm not cheating on my wife. I don't have the intention of leaving her... [and] I don't find myself tempted to do anything with a woman, other than my wife." Cain took this one step further and explained that sex with men actually *helped* his marriage:

I would never cheat on my wife with another woman. It's like being with a guy every so often helps me kinda maintain, in fact sometimes it even seems like it helps me become a better lover to her, but that's maybe part of my rationalization, I don't know... it takes that edge off. And, kinda satisfies my, my interest or longings or, desires or whatever.

Sex with men allowed Cain to relieve “urges” such that he could continue being a good husband and father. Ryan shared similar sentiments: “even when I have an encounter now, I'm not cheating on her. I wouldn't give up her for that.” Ryan, like others, knew that most others would perceive extramarital sex with men as cheating, but *he* nonetheless felt that it was not. By remaining committed to their wives or women partners, participants felt like sex with men was unproblematic or less of an issue than extramarital sex with women.

Relatedly, a handful of participants felt that their wives would feel differently about sex with men than sex with women (if they ever found out). They explained that sex with men did not involve romantic feelings that could affect participants' marital relationships, nor did sex with men suggest that their wives were inadequate. Extramarital sex with women, in contrast, may have involved romantic ties, and may have also indicated that participants' wives were deficient in some way. Lance explained that “I view it [sex with men] as not cheating because there isn't a love aspect to it, if there was I think I would call that cheating.” In contrast, he felt that sex with women was cheating and would have a worse impact on his marriage: “I would view that as cheating, I couldn't imagine if the situation came out explaining that one to my wife and bein' able to reconcile it. Whereas if it was a man, I think I could reasonably work it out.” As Joey relatedly shared,

A lot of guys say things are not good in their marriage, or their wife has health problems and so on, and they go on to say but I don't want to cheat on her, which is why I'm doing this [laughs]. And I understand exactly what they're saying. And an affair with another woman, that happened once to us, and it was my fault, a long time ago, but it was very very damaging, long-term damage, and I don't want to ever do that again. Now the obvious question is what if my wife finds out I'm doing this. Well certainly it would be a sit-down kind of discussion topic, but I think it would be far more acceptable than if I had an affair with a woman. I can't

fully explain that, I just think women have this real radar for other women, other competitors, and they're not gonna see a male in the same way as they would see another woman competitor.

By reflecting on his experiences with extramarital sex with women versus men, Joey felt that his wife would not perceive sex with a man as threatening as sex with a woman.

Several participants felt that their wives would see other women sexual partners as competitors in ways they would not feel about men. While participants who felt this way still kept their encounters secret, these interpretations helped them feel as though sex with men was not as threatening to their marriages as sex with women.

Relatedly, others felt that sexless marriages necessitated extramarital sex, and chose men rather than women because they considered the sex less threatening to their marriage given that it was non-romantic. As Pat explained,

I would characterize it as not cheating. Because part of marriage is sex. And my marriage has no sex. And God didn't put me on this earth to be miserable. So, yes, technically it is cheating if you really want to get technical, but I do not view it as cheating. I guess I rationalize it in my mind, I don't know... I view it as not cheating, since the wife gave up sex, and what am I to do? Wither away like she wants to, and is, and has? I don't think so.

The centrality of emotions became apparent when Pat noted that he never had extramarital sex with women because "I really didn't want to cheat on her," and that "I feel like hooking up with a man is self preservation. Hooking up with a woman is self-satisfaction." Thus, Pat and others perceived sex with men as necessary to relieve sexual needs, whereas sex with women they saw as indulgent and unethical. Brian, similarly, was not very interested in sex with men, but felt that it was the best option given that his wife no longer was interested in sex:

Within the last year though I have gotten a few blowjobs from guys, simply because the wife's goin' through menopause and she's basically not interested, and when she is interested it's half hearted, kind of thing. And I did actually pursue



some women maybe a year and a half ago, but I always felt like I was cheatin' on her, so I never had sex with any women. More of an emotional back and forth couple emails, that kind of thing, and then I always felt guilty, so I'd break it off. So I've actually not had a man-on-woman kind of affair, physically, more like flirting. Nothing more serious than flirting. Within the past year though, I could actually say 15 months, I've had a couple of blowjobs from guys. Simply, I felt like my balls were gonna explode, and wife just genuinely was not interested. And it's almost like you might be starvin' to death and you'd rather have a steak but you stop at McDonalds because it's nearby, so that kind of thing. I don't think it's cheating... the reason I haven't had sex with women is because I would feel like it is cheating, sort of an emotional sexual attraction, want to spend time with her kind of thing, more involved physically, mentally, emotionally... I have one guy that I actually became fond of, but he ended up moving out of state so we never really crossed that emotional barrier. Fondness, not love or anything along those lines. So basically, physical, men are physical women are physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, a mixture of all sorts of things... I think me with a female would sort of like be cheating, not sort of, would be cheating on my wife. But me with a guy, that's just kind of bustin' a nut, it's just physical jerkoff go, that kind of thing.

Brian had strong sexual desires, and turned to men because he did not feel he was emotionally involved with them in ways that he may be with women. Sex with men was not all that fulfilling, but it addressed his sexual needs without making him feel as though he was threatening his marriage. Adam shared similar thoughts: "I don't feel like I want to cheat on my wife with a woman to have sex. So I know other men that are in the same situation and it just became something that just happened." He continued:

As I explained earlier, my wife really doesn't necessarily enjoy sex, and I don't feel like I want to take up an affair or relationship with another woman. I don't feel right about that, so my sexual experience with other men is basically out of need to have some personal gratification. [It is] not cheating... I think men are a lot less complicated and that it's just easier, it's like, it's sex but there's no attachment. I don't think women can do that.

As with most other participants, Adam viewed women as generally incapable of separating sex from emotion, unlike men. This meant sex with men was fair game. Sex with men gave participants sexual satisfaction without feeling as though they threatened their marriages.

Several participants perceived sex with men as not cheating because only sex with women counted as cheating. They framed this almost like finding a loophole in their marriage contract. As Mike shared, “once I got married and stuff I promised her that she would be the only girl, and she has been.” He elaborated:

I don't think I'm cheatin' on my wife because they're not girls. You made a promise when you got married that you would not break that vow to her and you would not look at other women. Nowadays I'm not surprised they don't change all of that, in wedding ceremonies, and stuff like that, but at that time [they did not]... I wouldn't want my wife finding out, I don't tell her all the stuff that I do and things like that. She's been my best friend for years, I certainly wouldn't wanna do anything that would damage my wife or anything like that. We don't have sex anymore, and haven't for a while. I wouldn't do anything to hurt her feelings, damage her or anything, she's been my best friend ever since I was 8 years old. I would never do that, so I keep that part of my life away from her whatsoever. But that is how I usually get through this, the fact I'm really not cheatin' on her. Cuz I'm not seein a woman... But I wouldn't go with another woman. In fact, I had a guy text me the other day, he said “hey, [what] if I brought my wife,” I said absolutely not. I am, when it comes to women, that is my wife, and I will never disrespect her by going with another female, ever, no matter who they are.

Sex with men was not cheating because cheating necessarily involves sex with another woman. Mike and other participants did not necessarily feel good about their secretive sex, but they felt that it was much less threatening to their marriages than sex with women. Because Mike no longer had sex with his wife, he felt that his secretive encounters were irrelevant to her wellbeing. Kevin echoed this:

To me, meetin' up with women would be cheating on my wife. And when I meet up with guys, I justify it by sayin' well it's only fun between me and the other guy, it's not like I have another woman... if you cheated on your wife you would cheat another woman. Havin' sex with another woman would be cheatin' on your wife. And I have a feeling that with another guy, doesn't. I'm sure she or other people would argue on that, but that's just the way I feel.

Given Kevin's understanding that cheating was necessarily between a man and a woman, he felt that what he was doing was not cheating. Brett also felt this way, and used his

experience hooking up with two women to distinguish the difference between extramarital sex with men and women:

I think whether it's right or wrong, my perception of having a guy is a little less like cheating than it was with a woman. And not everyone would see it that way, the average South Dakotan would probably think that having sex with a guy is much more worse than having sex with another woman. But maybe I was rationalizing my behavior in thinking that well no if we jackoff with a guy or suck him off that's not quite as bad as having sex with another woman. I don't know why. I guess the traditional view of sanctity of marriage is you don't have sex with another woman. But marriage vows and such, at least in the old days, didn't address sex with another guy. It was just ignored as if it didn't exist. It was suppressed. Maybe that's why it didn't seem so wrong to me, I don't know... I've met up with 50 plus guys, I've met up with only two women. One encounter was quite positive, the other was not. And I think maybe the one experience was not as gratifying is it was a little too close to home, it seemed more like cheating, whereas I never really had that problem, never had that feeling at least, with another guy.

Because Brett felt more easily able to separate emotion from sex with men than women, he considered it fairly unproblematic for his marriage. Further, as he noted, it was not a violation of any vows—unlike the times he had sex with women. Matt also felt that a lack of romantic commitment to men made sex with them not cheating: “I feel it's not cheating, but if I went with a woman, it'd be cheating. Now why, I don't know... I just feel sometimes that you're meeting somebody, it's for sexual purposes only, and you'll never meet again.” Even if they did meet again, however, it was not for romantic attachment, and thus less problematic. Chris explained similar thoughts:

I guess I just don't look at male sex as cheating, just it's something to do once in a while to just get some release... I guess the attitude I have developed myself is if it's with a man it's not but if it's with a woman it is. Why I don't know... I don't see any emotional views with anybody else. I've got my emotional here at home and I keep them separate. I don't quote unquote fall in love with another guy or anything like that. Friendship yes, but that's it.

Chris only sought hookups or friendships with other men, not romantic relationships, meaning that sex with them was not cheating. Additionally, less sex at home made him

feel as though extramarital sex with men was necessary: “We don't have it anymore at all. I think it's probably related. I guess if I were getting somethin' at home it probably wouldn't be as much as what I look for otherwise.” A combination of desiring sex but not wanting to risk romantic attachment encouraged him to have sex with men rather than women. Seamus also felt that hooking up with men was, by default, “not cheating. Probably because it's with a person of the same sex and I would think that cheating is more with a person of the opposite sex.” George shared a similar experience:

Well my wife and I stopped being sexually active about that time. And so, there was not a lot of attraction towards her, she had gained weight, just wasn't sexually attractive to me anymore. But obviously I'm in a relationship with her where, our relationship is pretty much where we're like best friends now. So I still had the sexual desires to have sex or to do things sexually, but I'm also very committed to my wife about not doing things with other girls. So I felt that other desire was to have, or do something with a guy.

For George, sex with men was a way to rekindle his sex life without feeling as though he was cheating on his wife. He loved his wife, but no longer desired to have sex with her—but also did not wish to jeopardize their relationship. Adam also detailed that “my wife really doesn't necessarily enjoy sex, and I don't feel like I want to take up an affair or relationship with another woman. I don't feel right about that, so my sexual experience with other men is basically out of need to have some personal gratification.”

In sum, the vast majority of participants partnered with women viewed extramarital sex with men as not cheating or as less threatening to their relationships than sex with women. They remained emotionally committed to their women partners and had no plans to leave them. Further, they felt as though sex with men was much less likely to involve lasting romantic intimacy than sex with women, and thus it was less problematic. These interpretations helped them resolve guilt. Just as importantly, they preserved their

marriages or non-marital partnerships central to their understanding of themselves as straight, masculine, rural men. By not viewing sex with men as threatening to their marriages, they also viewed it as fairly unthreatening to their straightness and masculinity. Thus, their belief that extramarital sex with men was compatible with their marriage was a central element of bud-sex. As we will see in Chapter V, many participants *did* in fact do emotion work to avoid romantic attachments to men that may have threatened their partnerships with women. Sex with men did not, in and of itself, prevent extramarital romantic bonds. Nor was sex with men “naturally” without the potential for romantic attachment. Participants’ emotion work channeled feelings toward men into relationship forms that did not threaten their marriages. Regardless, they felt that by having sex with men rather than women, they helped preserve their marriages while still addressing their sexual needs.

It is worth repeating what I stated in Chapter III: most men considered ethnical non-monogamy and open same-sex sexuality impossible for them. Their partners, family members, friends, and living contexts constrained the choices available to them. They navigated their life constraints and came to the conclusion that secretive sex with men was the best option. Having sex with men in a bud-sex framework allowed them to address desires without affecting other parts of their life, including their partnerships with women, and without having to experience homophobia from loved ones. The most concerning narratives are those of men who secretly had sex with men and still had sex with their wives. Many men no longer had sex with their wives, and thus did not increase their risk for STI transmission, but some did. Thus, it is not secretive sex with men in and

of itself that is ethically problematic. It is secretive sex with men paired with continued sexual involvement with unknowing women partners.

### *Chapter Summary*

Through selective partnering practices and complicated interpretations of their sexual practices, participants rendered sex with men as compatible with straight identification and masculinity. These are defining features of bud-sex. Partnering with other men like themselves—masculine, straight or bisexual, and/or white—helped make the encounters seem more normal, and thus non-threatening to their sense of themselves as straight, masculine men. Interpreting sex with men as “helpin’ a buddy out” or acting on “urges” clarified that sex with men did not threaten their masculinity or heterosexuality. Indeed, some participants felt that it was even *necessary* to occasionally have sex with another man. This helped them address desires in a masculine way so they could otherwise continue being straight and masculine. Relatedly, perceiving male-male sexual practices as mostly unrelated to masculinity or sexual identity helped them view it as a pursuit of pleasure rather than a marker of identity. For the participants in relationships with women, perceiving sex with men as less threatening than sex with women helped them feel as though they remained good husbands/partners. This was especially key given that so many described marriage and family as central to their identities as rural, straight, masculine men.

Thus, what was consequential for participants’ identities was not *what* they did sexually, but *how*. Bud-sex involves interpretations of sex with men as non-threatening to masculinity, heterosexuality, or relationships with women. The participants’ narratives

show that the same sexual practices carry different meanings across situations and populations. These men are not having gay sex. They are having sex with men in a straight way. Just because two men touch each other's genitals in a mutually pleasurable way does not mean that they need to identify as gay or bisexual. Identity by definition involves a sense of self, not merely an assortment of practices. These men are straight and masculine, and how they have sex both reinforces and reflects this. They rejected what they had been taught about sex: sex with men is a marker of gayness and/or femininity. They formed their own interpretations of male-male sex with highly unique gender and sexual meanings. Similarities across participant narratives reflect their similar backgrounds and social locations. Most grew up in and/or currently lived in a rural area at the time of the interview; all described themselves as masculine; all but two identified as white; all identified as straight or some variation thereof; and all aligned themselves with straight culture and straight communities. Their similar backgrounds led to similar interpretations of and approaches to sex with men: bud-sex. This was despite the fact that they could talk about sex with men with almost no one else. Their similar interpretations and approaches to sex both reflect and reinforce their alignment with rural straight culture.

## CHAPTER V

### FRIENDSHIP, INTIMACY, AND LOVE BETWEEN MEN

[He] was a friend that I had known since childhood, and we reconnected at a time when we were both out of college and were going through a period of unemployment, and had some time. We went on a long camping trip. So, a la *Brokeback Mountain* [laughs]... I know that I was eager to get together with him and do things and sex was not as important as gettin' together and doin' things. [Sex] wasn't the main focal point... I wouldn't call it boyfriends. We were just men, were friends, and occasionally we had sex. (Vince, 67, rural Michigan)

Participants described relationships with men that took four main forms. First were casual, sex-only relationships that provided comfort, convenience, and security, but no deep or lasting emotional ties. Second were genuine friendships, such as the one Vince described. They involved activities other than sex, including talking about politics over coffee, hunting, camping, and even having couple dinner dates with their wives.

Participants formed these friendships because they genuinely enjoyed the time they spent with that person, even aside from sex. They were similar to many friendships between men, except the sex involved. These friendships were like those between many gay men (Stacey 2004), who often consider sex to be one activity of many friends can enjoy together. Third were deeply intimate but non-romantic friendships, which were more intimate than most friendships but less involved than romantic connections. These involved extensive time commitments, bareback sex, and/or sexual exclusivity as far as sex with men. Fourth were actual romantic relationships involving love. Men like Larry, who I detailed in Chapter I, perfectly illustrated this. Most formed relationships with at least some of their male sexual partners. This distinguishes them from many of Humphreys' (1970) participants, who stopped at public restrooms for quick, casual, one-time hookups. In total 37 of my participants formed friendships and/or experienced love,



and half described multiple relationship types with different men. The ways in which participants navigated these different relationship types reveals the emotional boundary work that was central to bud-sex. How men express and act on feelings toward other men reflects social context, as well as the constraints associated with masculinity and straight culture.

Regardless of relationship type, all participants engaged in emotion work to prevent attachments that would have affected other parts of their life, especially their relationships with women. The few who did experience feelings of love toward men tightly bounded those relationships or eventually cut them off. None sought to leave their women partners to romantically partner with a man. This is not to say that participants cut off all feelings of emotion for men. Some experienced temporary romance. Others formed friendships with male sexual partners, some of them quite intimate. Although many participants described their sex with men as emotionless, this is not entirely true. It was true for their one-time hookups, but not for their longer-lasting sexual relationships. Most were non-romantic, but participants did often feel comfort, safety, and/or friendship towards the sexual relationships they formed. These feelings were compatible with bud-sex. It was lasting romantic attachments that were incompatible, and which participants sought to avoid.

Participants reinforced their masculinity and heterosexuality through emotion work. Masculinity and heterosexuality take a lot of emotion work to uphold. By regulating the emotions they felt toward men and channeling romantic sentiments towards women, participants formed relationships compatible with rural straight culture. Male peers often discourage intimate emotions, such as expressing non-sexual love and

affection toward other men. Indeed, toughness is central to masculinity in many rural areas of the U.S. (Morris 2008, Kazyak 2012). In schools, male peers regulate one another's expressions of masculinity and heterosexuality, and often discourage men from showing affection for other men (Pascoe 2011). This affects how boys show emotion as men. Similar processes occur in adult men's homosocial spaces, where men regulate one another's masculinity (Bird 1996). Heterosexuality remains key to normative masculinity, so many men bolster their masculinity by reinforcing their straightness—sometimes through homophobia (Bridges and Pascoe 2016; Connell 1987; Falomir-Pichastor et al. 2009; Keiller 2010; Kimmel 2006; Munsch and Gruys 2018; O'Connor, Ford, and Banos 2017; Pascoe 2011; Weaver and Vescio 2015; Willer et al. 2013). Today, men's same-sex affection is viewed as a sign of gayness, bisexuality, or femininity, and thus incompatible with masculinity and heterosexuality. As a result, many straight men are wary of showing much affection toward other men, even if non-sexual and non-romantic. Historically, however, deep emotional ties between men were compatible with masculinity. They were also not necessarily tied to sexuality. For instance, Victorians considered sexual passion and love to be mostly unrelated. Many men formed socially validated and deeply intimate—and sometimes romantic—friendships with other men (Katz 2001; Rotundo 1989). These contained various types and degrees of physical contact, such as sleeping in the same bed to cuddling. Thus, the emotion work that is a key element of bud-sex is not inherent to either masculinity or heterosexuality. It reflects changing understandings of both masculinity and heterosexuality over time periods.

As we saw in Chapter II, most participants in relationships with women explained loving their wife or woman partner, and none had plans to leave them. They described their relationships with their women partners primarily with satisfaction. Main concerns were common relationship issues, like participants wanting more sex than their woman partner. Most expressed love and care for them, and did not want their relationships to change. Familial relationships—especially with children—were another key reason for participants not divorcing their wives. Thus, most were not miserable, closeted gay men, even as they prevented deeply emotional relationships with men that could have brought them satisfaction. They navigated a host of complex emotions and regulated their feelings for people in ways that conformed to rural straight culture. Emotions towards men were usually prevented, as in one-time hookups; kept fairly basic, as with feelings of comfort in purely sexual relationships; regulated and contained, as with short-term romantic relationships; or channeled into friendships compatible with masculinity and heterosexuality. These friendships—other than the sex involved—were similar to friendships many men have. Romantic sentiments were explicitly directed at women, excepting a handful of men who were divorced and/or had been single a great period of time—in which case they did not seek any romantic bond. They were not waiting for their male soul mate so they could come out. Instead, they regulated their relationships with other men to preserve their life as it was.

### *Sexual Relationships and Friends with Benefits*

In total 55 participants had past or current male sexual partners with whom they hooked up more than once, 2 did not but were looking for or open to this arrangement,

and just 3 were not interested in recurring sexual relationships with men and had never had them. In practice or preference, participants leaned toward forming sexual relationships in the past and/or the present.<sup>14</sup> Most participants in this project were open to one-time hookups, and numerous participants enjoyed them as much as (if not more than) sexual relationships. Nonetheless, many also enjoyed longer lasting but tightly bounded sexual relationships. These ranged from casual, sex-only relationships to genuine friendships. I call the latter “friends with benefits” (FWBs), mirroring colloquial that many people today use (see, for instance, the website *Urban Dictionary*). Some lasted for only a handful of meet-ups, whereas others lasted for dozens. In total 45 reported sex-only relationships, and 27 described FWBs (not including “best bud” friendships I discuss in the next section).<sup>15</sup> Many participants formed both sex-only relationships and friendships, with different men. These relationships lacked romance, but participants expressed enjoyment of them for other reasons: convenience, safety, and comfort with their sex-only relationships, and enjoyment of time spent with their FWBs. Thus, when participants described their hookups as emotionless, what they meant is that they usually avoided deep romantic attachments. Their lived experiences with male-male relationships contrast with Craigslist ads posted by straight men, many of which state they are looking for emotionless encounters (Reynolds 2015; Robinson and Vidal-Ortiz 2013; Ward 2015). How they present themselves in online settings is often different from their actual relationship practices. Non-romantic emotions and relationships did not affect participants’ familial relationships or other aspects of their lives. Sex-only relationships and FWBs were entirely compatible with bud-sex and straight culture, so long as the sex

---

<sup>14</sup> I use this term to describe someone the participants met for sex more than once.

<sup>15</sup> Overall, 33 participants reported FWBs and/or deeply intimate friendships. I discuss the former in this section and the latter in the next.

was kept secretive, and most participants channeled their feelings toward men into these types of relationships.

Many participants formed sexual relationships for simple reasons like safety, comfort, and convenience. They wanted to know that the other person was not going to harm them or reveal their identity, and were available for the kind of sex they wanted. As Marcus shared, “for convenience I think it would be better... somebody that you kinda knew, and you wouldn't be wondering about, is this person a weirdo, or whatever else, kind of a comfort thing more than anything.” He described one sexual relationship that fit this pattern:

There was a guy that, I guess we went on for about a year. He was married, [had] kids, and every once in a while we would hook up. It was kind of a understood thing that he knew the days that I worked, I knew the days that he worked, and if you're in the mood for somethin', we could always give each other a call and it would be there.

This type of relationship was potentially ongoing, but not intimate. Because of their casual nature, they were also prone to suddenly ending. Marcus, for instance, expressed regret that his sexual relationship ended abruptly after the man stopped contacting him. Aaron reinforced the utility of sexual relationships when he shared “in general I would prefer a regular partner. I would like the safety part of it, the ease when you walk in the door of somebody you've met before. That would be my preference, but it is hard to make reality.” Forming these sexual relationships was especially difficult given that rural areas have fewer potential sexual partners, and fewer ways to safely meet them (i.e., few spaces like bars or bathhouses). Thus, it was convenient and practical to form a sexual relationship when the opportunity arose. Mike noted that “once I find a person I like, then I stick with that... repeat people, once I've built people like that, then I don't need

anybody else. And so I just kept those ones over and over and over.” Mike and his hookup partners did not discuss sexual exclusivity, nor did they spend time outside of sex because “I have other interests and too much goin' on... once we're done it's over until the next time they call.” Mike sought sexual relationships that provided convenience, safety, and a guaranteed opportunity to bottom, not a chance to just hang out with another guy. Relatedly, Brian indicated that “you just get to a point where oh my God I feel like I'm gonna burst, and it's nice having, I would love to have a steady guy.” While his regulars were not necessarily friends, Brian did screen them before they had sex: “in all 3 cases we met at a coffee shop, a Starbucks nearby, met for coffee, talked. Don't hook up the first time, want to meet, get a judgment of their personality, second time judgment of their personality, third time ok, let's go jerk off together.” Convenience, safety, and comfort were hallmarks of non-friend sexual relationships. Many of the participants who described these types of relationships ensured they did not have any more emotional involvement. Some participants were not comfortable forming even friendships with their male sexual partners, and limited their relationships with men to just sex.

Other sexual relationships were genuine friendships. They involved hobbies or mundane activities that are hallmarks of many friendships between men. Participants did not feel as though sex substantially transformed the friendship. Sex was simply one of many activities they enjoyed. In this sense their friendships were like friendships between gay men, which often involve casual sex (Stacey 2004). Sex was great, but it was not the only tie holding the men together. It also did not indicate undying love or romance between them. They were friends who also happened to occasionally have sex. Joe shared that he and one of his FWBs “get together at either his house or mine, we'll cook, and

we'll eat, and then we'll play. It's only 2-3 times a year, so it's not that often... we know when we get together what's gonna happen, and it happens.” While sex was part of their friendship, it was only one aspect of many Joe enjoyed. Similarly, Billy engaged in a variety of activities with his five regulars: “road trips, drink beer, go down to the city look at chicks, go out and eat, shoot pool, I got one friend I hike with. It normally leads to sex, but we go out and do activities other than we meet and suck, so.” Richard also described a friendship that involved regular sex, as well as discussions of politics over coffee:

I'm not just gonna take Joe Blow off the street, [he would] have to be somebody I know or can get to know... Over the last couple of years, we [my FWB and I] have settled into a routine. He's not into men and dicks at all, he simply wants to get off. And since mine won't get hard, that's no big problem for me, so I meet with him periodically, not as often as he would like [laughs], but I meet with him periodically. And I get him off. And I get an emotional satisfaction out of it. Probably once every 1 month to 3 months depending on a whole bunch of factors, I'll get a little bit horny... He and I share the same political views. We're both staunch, dyed in the wool Republicans. We both think Obama is a bumbling idiot, we both feel the same way about it. I'm totally 100% pro-gun, so is he... So, whatever, we share a lot in common, we get along, we're friends, but as far as an emotional attachment, no, not any more so than you would have for any friend. Is it, a friendly thing, I don't feel any love or anything like that for him. No... I don't have to worry about makin' a mistake and mentioning him, I mention him all the time, talking to him, talk about him all the time, and we talk about a lot of other things other than sex. Sex is a very small part of our relationship. It's more friends, we discuss politics, and we discuss all sorts of shit.

Richard liked having sex with his friend, but enjoyed the companionship of a like-minded conservative just as much. He expressed frustration at how difficult it was to find sexual friends, and appreciation at those men he did find. Friendships for Richard and other participants fulfilled multiple social and sexual needs. Making FWBs known to loved ones meant they were more fully integrated into participants' lives, even as these

relationships remained non-romantic. Relatedly, Chris enjoyed his past FWB because of the opportunity it provided for male bonding:

We'd go have coffee, just visit in restaurants and go for walks... [It is nice to] just [have] somebody to be able to talk to once in a while. I don't know if you're married or not, but sometimes you can't discuss some things with your spouse, and it's nice havin' another guy to talk to and knowin' it's gonna stay right there... We were discussin' politics, things we like to travel to and what we've done in the past, general discussion.

Sexual friendships were ideal for Chris in two main ways: they provided sexual satisfaction and a chance for masculine, male-male bonding. While he loved his wife, he also wanted to have “guy time.” Many other participants described similar feelings: they loved their wives and needed friendships outside of that as well. If those friendships involved sex, even better. Relatedly, Trevor explained a friendship with one of his past FWBs: “when he and I get together, we might spend 2 or 3 hours together and talk politics, religion, news, and just, maybe spend more time together just as associates than as sex partners.” Trevor, like a few other participants, used sex with men as a way to build connections and spend time with other men. Sexual friendships usually involved in-depth conversation or activities outside of sex, and genuine enjoyment of time spent with that person. It was not necessarily more intimate than other types of friendships.

Rurality shaped the friendships that participants formed with other men. Pat, for instance, owned a hunting cabin and met his friend there for sex and coffee:

We met out here in the country at my hunting cabin, and proceeded to get naked. And we talked maybe for an hour before then, had a very wonderful conversation about nothing in particular but the world in general. He was a little bit older than I was, and he gave me a wonderful blowjob. And became a regular. He would want to get away and talk to another human, as he called it, somebody that was knowledgeable and sane. And he would drive 30 miles to get here and we would have coffee and talk about politics and the world events and before the meeting would be over we would be naked and I would get a blowjob. And he would leave and we'd wait a day or two and one of us would get ahold of the other one. And



we would meet up again out here at the cabin, where I'm at now, and I'd have the coffee pot on and we'd talk for an hour.

Pat enjoyed having conversations with his FWB. The sex was pleasurable, but so too was the company he shared. He appreciated this arrangement because “[I like] somebody you can say hey what are you doin’ today, want to come over for coffee? You want to get together and see what happens? The conversation, the good fellowship, being able to depend on somebody.” This extended to times where they met and no sex was involved:

If they need help I'll go over and help them. They don't live around, well this is not in a town, this is in the country, rural setting in the country, but if they need help yes I will go to their house and help them. Sometimes I take them with me when I go shopping, yes, we have meeting where sex is not even mentioned.

Although Pat formed relationships with these men for sex, they transitioned into friendships involving other activities. Remote hunting cabins, like Pat’s, were ideal for meeting friends for sex (and coffee). Most participants did not have a cabin, but many did enjoy hunting, hiking, and other rural activities. For instance, Jon had two FWBs in the past and explained that “we drink beer, hang out, go do stuff that isn't sex... we go hunting and hiking.” Bob also enjoyed rural hobbies with his sexual friends, which sometimes directly led to sex:

[The last time] we took a walk out in the country and we went to this private place that he knows and we walked around, looked at the birds, different places, go fishing, we talked about gettin’ together and goin’ doin’ some fishing and so forth. Hey well let me show you this little cabin over here, blah blah blah, I've never been there before, and the next thing you know, clothes come off and the game's on.

Bob enjoyed having spontaneous sex with his friends in the outdoors. He met most of these friends through networks, especially through military contacts, rather than online. He was able to do this by being highly perceptive of other men’s intentions. One situation

where that played out involved a former military buddy who came to live in his in-law cottage:

The guy that used to be really good friends with me, he actually lived with us for a short time, before I lived where I live now. We had a separate building from our home and actually him and his wife got displaced through a big family knockdown, and they had to have a place to go. He and I were in the [military] together... he and I wound up bein' pretty much a daily thing. Every day, whenever it got time for him to get up and go to work or the evening, he got woke up in a special way because she was at work, my wife's busy with kids, so nobody knows anything. But that was pretty much an everyday thing with me and him.

Thanks to having an in-law cottage, Bob was able to hook up with this friend. This, in turn, was possible thanks to inexpensive land and housing costs in the rural Midwest.

Thus, while rurality constrains opportunities for male-male sex in some ways, it also enables them in others. The many contacts with whom Bob was able to have sex indicates just how perceptive he was in determining to what men he could send subtle signals. His ability to hook up with men was also in part due to a gendered division of labor: his wife's care of their children meant he was able to find time to hook up with friends. Few participants described convenient situations like Bob's, but they nonetheless found time for sex. Like others, Adam described having friends with whom he enjoyed rural hobbies as well as mundane activities:

Some of them I actually become friends with. Do things like go fishing, see a movie, go out to dinner with their spouses and my spouse, those types of things... bike riding, going to coffee, just sometimes talking, getting together to talk. Physical activities sometimes, assisting with personal projects like helping install a patio door or paint a room, the things that any normal people would participate in. Just day to day things. Sometimes riding shotgun when one has to go out of town for a few hours or something like that, just generally enjoy each other's company. The last time we met up we didn't have any sexual interaction with each other.

Participants like Adam enjoyed friendships that sometimes involved sex, but were otherwise just like other friendships. Friendship activities ranged from rural hobbies like

fishing to more intimate activities, like spending time with each other's spouses for dinner. This is particularly striking: many participants did not hide their FWBs from their wives. They just did not tell them about the sex they occasionally enjoyed. Several participants' FWBs were fully integrated into the social fabric of their lives. FWBs met participants' social and sexual needs. Because no romance was involved, they did not threaten participants' marriages, relationships with their children, or their alignment with straight culture.

#### *Deeply Intimate Friendships: Best Buds*

Other friendships participants formed with men were intimate in ways that "friend" cannot fully capture. Participants clarified that these friendships did not involve love, but instead involved activities and/or emotions unlike the casual friendships in the last section. Many involved sexual exclusivity (as far as sex with men), unprotected sex, deep emotional ties, and/or extensive time commitment. None of the 11 that described this type of friendship secretly hoped they would blossom into a long-term romance. Instead, participants regulated them to ensure they did not transition into anything that may have affected their marriages. They enjoyed their friendships in their current forms, and most did not hope they would change into anything else. These types of relationships I call "best-bud" friendships. The exceptional trust and/or deep emotional ties of best-bud friendships distinguish them from FWB friendships. Given that both were non-romantic, however, they were compatible with bud-sex.

Hallmarks of deep sexual friendships were extensive time commitments, sexual exclusivity, and/or unprotected sex. Together, they show that participants enjoyed

spending time with their best-bud friends and often felt extensive trust towards them.

Sometimes these types of friendships started as casual hookups. For instance, Sean's best-bud friendship transitioned into something involving sexual exclusivity:

This guy started out as just a sexual, meetin' behind the tree thing, and then I think we've kind of become friends. We stay in touch with each other and we talk, [but] I haven't seen him or been with him for some time. Since I've been with this guy I haven't been with any other men... we didn't make an agreement or anything, he's free to do what he wants [and] I'm free to do what I want. But I have spoken with him that I haven't been with anybody since we were together last, we text a lot, and he's texted back the same thing that he hasn't been with anybody else since our last encounter.

Although Sean and his friend were not bound by monogamy, they were each other's only male sexual partner. Underlining their rural location, Sean shared that the first time they met in person "we met at a predetermined spot and went another place out in the country that he knew about that's pretty secluded in some woods, and that's where we had sex the first time." While Sean and his friend did not see each other very often, their sexual monogamy underscores the intimacy they shared. Kevin, in contrast, had semi-regular weekend retreats with his FWB, Warren, and enjoyed topping him without a condom:

It's just been about three weeks ago. I've got a guy I see every once in a while, maybe [a] couple, 3 times a year. He lives quite a ways away from me. And he was here, everybody was gone for the weekend except for me, and he stayed all night, on Saturday night, and we had some sex that Saturday night. That Sunday morning again before he left, we did some more.

Kevin's friendship with Warren involved weekend getaways with one another. Given that Kevin was married and Warren lived three hours away, it took extensive logistical coordination to find time they could spend together. They trusted each other so much, Kevin reported, that they did not use condoms. David too spent weekends with his FWB, Marley, which involved time engaging in mundane activities other than sex. He described

this friendship fairly nonchalantly. The sexual activities he and Marley enjoyed, however, reveal just how trusting and intimate they were with one another:

Right now, there's only one guy that I see. We get together maybe twice a month. [There is] nobody else, and the reason for that is we're both safe, and want to stay that way. So by not doing anything with anybody else, we can guarantee that. Because neither one of us are pursuing people for conquests or anything, we have sex with each other because we enjoy it, we like it, and we do things we both like to do. And by keeping it between the two of us, we keep it safe. Because neither one of us like condoms... We always take our clothes off, then we'll hug each other, kiss a little bit, fondle each other, a lot of handling, massaging, that kind of thing, then we shower together, wash each other, spend a lot of time washin' our cock, balls, asses, stuff like that. Then if I haven't given myself an enema before I get there, then he gives me one and cleans me out. Then we'll generally go lay on the bed and just hold each other, play with each other, go back and forth because layin' on your back, one or the other can do somethin' but it's hard to, neither one of us is left handed so it doesn't work very well. And then usually either he sucks me or I suck him, not necessarily to completion, but just for pleasure for a while. And then before long he'll say "are you ready for me to fuck you" and I usually say "yes I am," then we'll talk about which position to use. He likes me to get on the edge of the bed on my side with my butt hanging out on the edge of the bed so he can stand on the floor. That's the way we do it most of the time. We vary, we do other things too. Then after he's cum in me, he likes to watch it run back out. Then he'll go get some wet wash rag or somethin' and clean me up with that, and at that point he usually sucks me off until I cum, to completion. Then by that time it's usually time for dinner or maybe we're goin' out to the theater, to the adult theater, or something else, and we'll do that. And we'll come back from that and then we'll have more sex, sometimes he'll screw me again, sometimes not, sometimes we'll suck some more, but all the time it's naked and hands on. That's the big thing, the tactile thought of just touchin' each other, playin' with each other, feelin' each other. We sleep together, and he loves to wake up in the middle of the night and start playin' with me, and that's usually how I wake up, either his hands on me or his mouth... my recurring guy, I've been with him probably, jeez, 8-10 times, maybe more, but since I met him too I haven't really been lookin' for anybody else.

David's friendship did not contain romance or strong emotional ties. It was deeply intimate, however, as indicated by cuddling, sleeping together, sexual exclusivity, unprotected sex, and even assistance with enemas. David and Marley engaged in activities most often associated with couples, even as they made sure no romantic bonds formed. Not even most gay men give one another enemas, so David's narrative reveals

the deep intimacy he shared with Marley. As with other participants, David described this friendship with nonchalance. He did not consider it meaningful for his identity, but rather enjoyed the relationship in the form it took: compatible with all other aspects of his life.

Jeremy also shared a deeply intimate friendship with a sexual partner, Cody, which influenced him to try male-male sexual activities had had not previously tried. He had sex with Cody after developing a friendship with him. Of all the men with whom he had sex, he only kissed and had anal sex with Cody:

He started to perform oral sex on me, at which point it was the first time I found that I was more interested in watching what he was doing to me than watching the porn on the screen. Up to that point in my life I probably had the most shattering orgasm I've ever had. It was almost frightening how powerful it was, and it really was a head to toe experience. When it was over with I was shaking and I just felt like that was the first time I had a real orgasm. I think it was exciting because I had known him for a while and there had been this playfulness back and forth between us. Although up until the very last moment, until I said yes, I had never really entertained that it was ever truly going to happen. And we weren't best buddies, but we were well acquainted enough that I did see him on a regular basis, more than a couple of times a week because of work. So I think it was the familiarity, looking down and seeing somebody that I knew, somebody that I respected, somebody that I found attractive. And somebody who, I think this might be the most important part for me at that time, somebody who seemed to be really enjoying what they were doing. He came at the same time that I did, which I found terribly exciting... [in later encounters with him] I found the kissing very erotic. In fact it was when I started to kiss him and we were naked, I was on top of him, and when I felt both of our erections pressing against one another, I found that feeling very erotic. And the more we kissed the more I wanted to be inside of him. And so the first time I kissed him also coincided with the first time I ever performed anal on a guy.

Jeremy felt so comfortable with Cody that he tried physical and sexual activities with which he had no prior experience. At the time of the interview, he had neither topped or kissed any other man. He felt a strong connection to Cody, albeit not a romantic one. It was strong enough that the orgasm Jeremy initially had was “almost frightening.” The sexual friendship he developed with Cody was so rewarding that it encouraged Jeremy to

begin exploring sex with other men, putting him on a new sexual trajectory. While best-bud friendships involved no love or romance, they did often involve extensive trust, intimacy, and/or sexual exclusivity.

Several participants described friendships that *almost* turned romantic. Because they were not looking for romance with a man, they reworked the relationship to ensure it did not interfere with other aspects of their life. The difference between these situations and the ones in the next section is that participants were much warier about the potential for romantic involvement, and proactively prevented romance from forming. Jack for instance “became good friends” with one hookup partner, Nick, and this man’s wife. Seeing Nick was difficult, as they lived 2.5 hours away from each other, but they nonetheless arranged trips to see one another. Jack eventually cut off sex with Nick because he felt like their relationship threatened other aspects of their lives:

It was really getting to the point where I was afraid his wife was going to start suspicioning things, and I really really like his wife and I did not want to destroy his family. I needed to put my physical attraction aside and he needed to do the same, and we made a mutual agreement that it would be best that we stop. That was one of the exceptions to all those, he was one of them that, we did fuck, and it was very enjoyable for both of us. And we did kiss, I spent the night at his house when his wife was gone. That was a little more intense, but there was no love, per se, I would not allow myself to go there. I didn't have an interest in falling in love for 1, and number 2 he was married, it's complicating. We had a great time. And we still do, we still talk. But we just know we can't go there.

Jack felt a connection to Nick, which lasted for years. Afraid their relationship might affect Nick’s marriage and even cause Jack to fall in love, Jack ask that their sex stop. In so doing he engaged in emotional boundary work that secured his heterosexuality and masculinity. Both would have been at threat had he fallen in love. While Jack experienced some feelings for men, he made sure he would never form a romantic bond.

Indeed, Jack explained that his ideal romantic partner would be a woman. He did not seek to develop this type of relationship with a man:

A woman. I've thought a lot about that. Thought that what if I decided, because I've been single for a while now, what if I just let, I don't know if you'd call it nature, but let myself have feelings for a man. And then I just, no, I don't have any desire, don't want to go there, because I like the physical attraction and emotion involved with a female I've had since I was divorced. I've had 3 live-in women, long-term relationships, of course none of them worked out, but I just prefer that with a woman.

While Jack considered partnering with a man, he rejected it in favor of partnering with a woman. Given that he was strongly aligned with rural straight culture, he found fulfillment in relationships with women, not men. He did not seek to change any aspect of his life, which would have been necessary had he partnered with a man. This is why he tightly regulated his friendship with Nick. Like Jack, Larry had no plans to openly form a relationship with a man. Even so, Larry formed emotional friendships with several sexual partners, even other than the one that turned romantic. Larry integrated his FWB relationships into his everyday life, even going so far as to arrange activities with their women partners. A similar emotional connection developed with Larry's college roommate. While they both identified as straight and had girlfriends, they began watching pornography together. This later transitioned into other sexual activity, as well as feelings of emotional attachment:

I wouldn't say romantic, I would say emotional though. I don't know [how] I would make the distinction between the two, but it wasn't romantic in the way that we were romantically involved but it became emotional and if I had a girlfriend or he had a girlfriend, there were some difficult emotions there. But it was just awkward. I don't think we ever talked about it or thought about it or anything. It wasn't like you're my lover and you're bringing a girl over [laughs]! Or something like that. So I don't think either of us even knew how to identify those things, it was just awkward, where you'd find yourself a little bit pissy or something like that... [after moving out] I missed him, and I think he missed me too. I think we both made phone calls hoping the other would take the hook, and it never



happened. I would say on both of our ends. Text messages like, late at night, what's up, how have you been, all of those little indicators that would lead us to somethin' before didn't transpire with anything on both of our ends. It was kind of difficult for a while. Yeah. I enjoyed it but it kind of opened the door to kind of more of a conflict, an internal conflict with me.

This roommate-turned-sexual-friend situation was not romantic, but it was emotional.

Indeed, Larry reported feeling jealousy when his friend's girlfriend visited. Emotional boundary work involved costs, such as the "internal conflict" Larry experienced after this relationship ended. Nonetheless, he continued to enjoy forming emotional attachments to other men, so long as they did not affect relationships to his women partners.

Overall, numerous participants reported deeply intimate but non-romantic friendships. They often involved time spent together outside of sex, including with one another's women partners; sexual exclusivity; unprotected sex; and/or feelings of emotional connection. These friendships were compatible with rural straight culture because they did not affect any other aspect of the participants' lives, including their relationships with women. They did take emotion work to maintain, and by preventing romantic attachments to men participants sacrificed the potential for loving partnerships with other men. This also, however, allowed them to continue enjoying fulfilling and loving relationships with women, as well as their participation in straight culture. More broadly, their intimate best-bud friendships show that straight men are capable of deeply intimate relationships with other men—and that expectations of heterosexuality and masculinity shape the forms they take.

*Love Towards Men*

Although only 11 participants reported love or past romantic relationships with other men, the narratives of those who did show that straight men are capable of love toward men. Their response to this love shows the costs of aligning themselves with heterosexuality and normative masculinity. These costs are considerable even as they reap other benefits, such as pleasure from marriages to women, good relationships with children, and comfort knowing they will not experience homophobia from loved ones. Psychological research indicates that sexual attraction and romantic attraction are distinct (Diamond 2003), and participants differed from one another in their level of sexual and romantic attractions. Regardless of what romantic capacity participants were able to experience, however, what tied them together was their investment in regulating their emotions towards men. The love some felt towards other men, and their subsequent response, shows how emotion work is central to bud-sex. Previous research (Adam 2000) has shown that a key difference between straight and gay/bisexual MSM is their willingness to experience emotional or romantic attachments to other men. My research shows many straight men can and do enter in romantic arrangements with other men, but eventually cut them off. This reflects and reinforces their alignment with straight culture. It also reflects how their particular way of engaging with other men—bud-sex—necessitated romantic boundaries between themselves and other men. These narratives show the romantic possibilities men can experience, but which they usually prevent or tightly bound to preserve their masculinity and heterosexuality.

The minority of participants who formed romantic relationships with other men always ensured they did not affect their marriages or relationships with their children. Participants found being a husband and father greatly fulfilling, and were not willing to

threaten or change those relationships. Val provided one example of this. He and one man, Dominic, had been close friends for several decades, and were even roommates in graduate school. In the past they enjoyed several hobbies together: “hunting, fishing, we'd go to movies together, we travel a lot, camped a lot, we're both married and the 4 of us are all very good friends. [We did] just about everything.” In addition to being sexual partners, they were socially involved as well. Val expressed that he was in love with Dominic but took steps to ensure that never affected their lives:

The closest to being in love was the one roommate that is still a very close friend of mine. I was pretty much in love with him and still am, but we have a very workable agreement. In that we spend a lot of time together and so forth and don't allow it to get in the way of each other's marriages and so forth. We like each other's marital partners as well, so. We're all very good friends... [He lives] quite a ways away, and like I said he's had some health issues and wives are close friends and so forth, so [we] just agreed to not do that. Although there have been times when it was extremely tempting. We do talk about things that we did together, sex that we had together. We talk about our sex lives now with women, and even when we were hooking up we talked about sex with women that we both had, and we actually had a threesome with a woman while we were in grad school.

Although Val was “pretty much in love” with Dominic, they agreed to stop having sex and set emotional boundaries so their marital relationships were not affected. Like Larry's narrative, Val and his wife enjoyed the company of Dominic and his wife. No one but Val and Dominic knew the relationship they used to share. Although Val and Dominic still desired to have sex, they did not because “we don't live close together anymore and usually when we're together our wives are with us too, and so forth. And he's had some physical problems lately but definitely would love to spend a weekend in bed together. Definitely would be a turn on for me.” Their growing feelings of love for one another also influenced them to stop having sex, lest their relationship grew into something that would have affected their marriages. Over time, due to health issues,

physical distance separating them, and emotion work to stifle feelings of love, their relationship grew more platonic. Nonetheless, Val noted that “we talk about sex quite a lot, even still,” when they were together. This is reminiscent of the relationship between two men in the 2017 film *Call Me By Your Name*. Like Val and Dominic, the characters referred to their deeply intimate past—even as one prevented similar situations from happening again in the future. Numerous participants experienced love or romance for another man, but they ensured no romantic relationships turned into anything that could threaten their marital or familial relationships.

This was the case even for participants who described themselves as currently being in love. Like Larry, Bob described a deep feeling of love for one of his sexual partners, Ken, but had no plans to divorce his wife. Bob only foresaw himself partnering with Ken if his wife died or filed for divorce, neither of which looked likely in the foreseeable future. He noted that with Ken there was “more than a physical attraction, with him it was a little bit more than just the sex and the physical contact, it was a little more emotional. Not crybaby shit, it was more of an emotional attraction there as well, not just the physical side of it... I know I sound sissy-fied as hell. This is where it goes against my grain as far as bein’ masculine.” His comment underscores his discomfort expressing feelings of love toward another man, which is widely seen as incompatible with heterosexuality and masculinity. He nonetheless felt love for Ken. There was one point where Bob came close to divorcing his wife, as they experienced major marital issues at the time. He did not file for divorce, though, because of his children:

Had it not been for my kids at that time in my life, yeah I would have been gone in a heartbeat because I felt so strongly about bein’ with Ken. He never asked me to do that and wouldn’t ask me to do that, I know he wouldn’t, but with the circumstances I was dealin’ with at the time it was very very imminent that it

could have happened. Had it not been for my children, it most definitely would have happened.

Bob came close to divorcing his wife, but decided against it out of concern for his children. Fatherhood is a key element of rural straight culture, and Bob was not willing to threaten his relationships with his children to partner with a man. Still, even years past this incident, Bob felt love for Ken:

To be honest with you, I'm in love with him. There's no other way for me to describe it, I love everything about him, his personality, his looks, the way he cares for me. I'm in love with him, have been since the day I laid eyes on him... Of all the guys that I've been with he's probably, if I had the opportunity to be lifelong partners with him, he would be the one. There wouldn't be no other.

Bob remained married to his wife at the time of the interview, even as he continued to fantasize about partnering with Ken. His arrangement was acceptable to him: he was able to see Ken every once in a while, during which times they enjoyed sex and deep emotional intimacy. Bob was also, at the same time, able to maintain his current relationships with his wife, children, other relatives, and members of his rural community. It was not perfect, but it worked. The ways in which participants navigated romantic relationships with other men shows their costs, but also the benefits they were able to reap.

Other participants also experienced romanticism with men, but in the context of a more established relationship with that man. Harrison for instance entered into a romantic arrangement with one man, Robert, *for five years*. He described he and Robert as being “deeply connected friends,” but ones that were exclusive. They met several months after Harrison and his wife divorced, and he felt very connected to Robert:

Just deeply connected friends, saw each other exclusively. Never lived together or anything, but that's the only person I saw. Do things together, listen to their life

story, inner circle, the type of friend that you can only afford to have one because it's so time consuming, you make such a great investment.

Even though Harrison referred to Robert as a friend, he also clarified that they “saw each other exclusively” and described them as being in a relationship. Harrison actually identified as gay during the time they were partners. After they separated, however, he began identifying as straight once again:

I probably identified as straight but I was in denial, it was irrational. I wasn't, but I told myself I probably was. When I was with him I identified as gay. [That changed] when we broke up. When you're exclusive with somebody, that is my definition of being in a relationship, a partnership, a union. When you aren't exclusive, uh-uh [no].

Harrison had a long-lasting, romantic relationship with Robert and even identified as gay while they were in a relationship. Their relationship was secretive, both because Harrison kept it hidden from his other loved ones and because Robert was in a partnership with a man already (i.e., he was cheating on this partner with Harrison and was exclusive with Harrison other than his male partner). After Harrison and Robert separated, however, Harrison again began identifying as straight. This is the case even as he told his daughters about his relationship, and referred to Robert “as the guy I’ve been seeing.” Harrison defines himself in part based on the people with whom he is in a relationship. While he and Robert separated, they established a friendship after several years of not talking. As a result, Robert remains an important part of Harrison’s life. As Harrison explained, when they became friends several years after separating “that’s when the healing began. When we weren’t talking it was toxic. But when we started speaking, that’s when I at least was able to start mending.” As Harrison is single now, he identifies as straight—reflecting his alignment with straight culture.

Few other participants described a similar situation of shifting sexual identities several times. Research has long established, however, that many individuals define themselves in part based on the people with whom they are sexually or romantically involved (e.g., Diamond 2009; Rust 1992). It is also not uncommon for people to shift to straight identities from non-straight identities. For example, in Add Health, a nationally representative sample of young adults in their 20s and 30s, 18.6% of women and 6.8% of men changed sexual identities in the six years between survey waves (Silva 2017). Of them, about 1/3 actually shifted *to* a straight identity. One reason may be that individuals form same-sex relationships and later end them, and no longer feel as though a non-straight identity makes sense for them without that partnership. Straight culture is so important for many people that even if they identify as non-straight for a time, like Harrison, many eventually re-claim a straight identity. With it, they re-align themselves with straight culture. In any case, even participants who enjoyed romantic connections with a man eventually ended the relationship or tightly bounded it. This reflects how emotion work is central to bud-sex.

Some participants who had never experienced love for another man acknowledged that they may have partnered with a man, had their life turned out differently. All, however, clarified that they loved their women partners and had no plans to leave them. This reinforces that marriage and family formation is a key aspect of rural straight culture. Having made the choice to form those relationships, participants planned to stick with them. Considering a hypothetical romantic partnership with a man was one thing, but actually taking steps to do it was another. As Mike said,

If I hadn't gotten married, I would probably let the other side have more, me time. But because I got married I kept that in, kept it hidden, and still do, to some

degree. But if I had not gotten married, I can't promise I would be with a woman today. I think that that side would have been, tried to see whether or not I would go that direction. But because I didn't have that opportunity, just the way it is... I think that if I had to do it all over again, I would not have gotten married for one thing. Even if I had liked girls I probably wouldn't have gotten married. I mean, I don't have any problems with my wife, don't get me wrong, I have two daughters and they're wonderful girls. So I don't have any problems with that, I just think that if I would have had more options at first I probably wouldn't have made the decision I made.

Mike expressed considerable nuance. He stated that he loved his wife and would not leave her, and enjoyed being married and being a father. He may not have chosen this path had his living context and generation not been so heteronormative, however. Other participants noted that they were not sure if they would romantically partner with a man if their wives died or divorced them, but none wanted this to happen.

In sum, 11 participants experienced love or a past romantic relationship with a man. A handful stated that they may have partnered with a man, but their life trajectory or unwillingness to be gay prevented that from happening. In all cases, participants engaged in extensive emotional boundary work, a key pillar of bud-sex. Those who did experience love for men ensured it did not affect their relationships with their women partners or children. Those who were open to the possibility of romanticism with men, or who were currently in love with another man, expressed intentions to keep those relationships tightly bounded. This was to not affect other parts of their life. Most participants simply avoided deep romantic attachments with other men, for example by sticking to sexual relationships or FWBs. For those that went beyond those, however, we see the emotional work it took to maintain their masculinity and heterosexuality. The associated costs were particularly impactful for the men who reported love for another man.



### *Chapter Summary*

Emotion work is central to bud-sex, and to heterosexuality and masculinity more broadly. Most men who have sex with other men in a bud-sex framework make sure they do not form romantic attachments to other men, and instead channel their feelings toward men into sex-only relationships or FWB arrangements. Those who did experience love towards men ensured it did not affect any other parts of their life. While only a handful of participants reported love toward another man, the ways in which they navigated that reveals the emotion work it took to maintain their heterosexuality and masculinity. Most either ended the romantic relationship with the man or tightly bounded it. None left their wives or women partners, and all continued to identify as straight. Thus, while Craigslist ads are phrased in ways that make it seem like romanticism between men never happens (Reynolds 2015; Robinson and Vidal-Ortiz 2013; Ward 2015), romantic ties do occur. Compatible with bud-sex are other emotions, such as feelings of safety, convenience, or even friendship. In some cases friendships were quite intimate, even if non-romantic. Participants instead channeled romantic energy toward women partners. This reflects participants' alignment with rural straight culture.

The various types of sexual relationships participants enjoyed reinforces that their sex with men did involve emotions, albeit not necessarily romance. Casual sex-only relationships involved feelings of convenience, comfort, and safety. Sexual friendships included time spent together outside of sex, much like any non-sexual friendship would. Some friendships were deeply intimate, as indicated by sexual exclusivity, unprotected sex, and/or feelings of emotional connection. These relationships highlight how bud-sex is compatible with any type of male-male relationship *except* those that threaten other

parts of the participants' lives. While these men sought sexual gratification, they often hoped for—or were open to—something more. Sometimes it was a matter of sexual convenience and safety, and other times it was a genuine desire for human connection. The various ways they navigated relationships with men shows how they engaged in emotion work to satisfy sexual and/or emotional desires, but without threatening their heterosexuality or masculinity. In particular, they sought to protect their relationships with their children and women partners. Their emotion work was not without costs—or benefits. Managing their emotions to maintain alignment with straight culture cost them long-term romantic relationships with men, but gained them satisfying relationships with women. Participants regulated their emotions and relationships in ways that both reflected and reinforced their alignment with straight culture. These participants are not unhappy gay men. They are straight men who regulate their emotions in line with what rural straight culture encourages.

A range of studies examine why some MSM do not identify as gay or bisexual, many of them in the fields of psychology or public health (see Hudson 2013 for a comprehensive literature review). While important, they often consider the factors that “push” men away from gay or bisexual identification, like heterosexism. They do not consider as much the “pull” factors that encourage men to identify as straight, such as genuine satisfaction in aligning themselves with straight culture. This is in part because until recently scholars discussed gay culture, but not straight culture—as if it does not exist. Scholars such as Stevi Jackson (1999) and Jane Ward (2015) have helped to correct this, but more research is needed. Only by acknowledging straight culture can we better understand how it operates, as well as its appeal to men regardless of sexual attractions or

practices. Identification as straight and masculine is due to a complex combination of multiple factors, including institutions and contexts that valorize masculinity and heterosexuality; heterosexism; and enjoyment of straight culture. All overlap, all work together to affect how men experience and regulate their emotions, and all shape how men align themselves with masculinity and heterosexuality.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION:

#### TOWARD A SEXUAL CULTURES FRAMEWORK

To me it [mutual masturbation] is not a big deal. It's no different than shaking hands. (Glenn)

Participants identified as straight and masculine primarily due to their alignment with *rural white straight culture*. They genuinely enjoyed straight culture, including the communities to which they belonged and the families they formed as adults. None considered sex with men a key part of how they understood themselves. Participants had varying levels of attractions to men and different motivations for having sex with them. Most experienced unintentional changes to their attractions over the life course, and about a third reported that their wives experienced age-related bodily changes that made sex more difficult for them. This encouraged participants to have sex with other men, even as they continued perceiving themselves as straight and masculine. They formed relationships with other men that took the form of casual, sex-only connections; sexual friendships; deeply intimate but non-romantic attachments; and/or romantic relationships with other men, which were temporary and/or tightly bounded. Participants channeled their feelings for men into relationships that did not affect any other parts of their life. They protected their heterosexuality and masculinity by having what I call *bud-sex*. This involved secretive, (mostly) non-romantic sex with men like themselves, in ways that they interpreted as non-threatening to their partnerships with women, their masculinity, or their heterosexuality. How they had sex with men, and how they interpreted it as compatible with both straightness and masculinity, reflected and reinforced their alignment with rural straight culture. They did not identify as straight because they were

closeted. Instead, they identified as straight because they genuinely enjoyed straight culture and saw themselves as straight, masculine men—and did not want to change that.

Individuals identify in ways that reflect their alignment with particular cultures and communities (see also Ward 2015). Different sexual practices have different meanings across contexts and populations. Straight and gay men engage in similar sexual practices, for instance, but interpret them in different ways. Participant narratives have practical and theoretical significance for future research in public health, psychology, and sociology. Future research should incorporate a *sexual cultures* framework when examining the wellbeing of sexual minority populations. *Sexual culture is a missing framework in research about sexual minority populations.* Individual wellbeing cannot be examined without evaluating the sexual cultures with which they align themselves. Participant experiences also reveal tensions between queerness and normativity, and highlight the significance of sexual narratives for sociological knowledge.

#### *Practical Implications: Sexual Minority Wellbeing and Sexual Cultures*

While participants experienced varying levels of internalized homophobia, they identified as straight mostly because of their enjoyment of rural white straight culture. They reported satisfaction with their communities and networks that were composed mostly of other straight people. Those partnered to women stated they loved their women partners and had no plans to leave them. Participants found great meaning in being a partner and/or father. Their happiness contrasts with portrayals of them as miserable and secretly gay or bisexual, as in *Brokeback Mountain*. A more accurate cultural reference is Oliver in *Call Me by Your Name*. Oliver experienced a summer of passion with another

man, Elio, but nonetheless decided to marry a woman and (presumably) identify as straight. He enjoyed sex and romance with Elio, but also straight culture.

Participant narratives give new directions to research about sexual minority mental health and wellbeing in public health, psychology, and sociology. Research and clinical practice should validate individuals' alignment with particular sexual cultures, not imposing certain sexual identities over others. Costs of doing otherwise can be profound. Recall that Ryan reported going to a therapist who suggested that he come out as gay. He found this so unappealing that he considered suicide. Eventually Ryan decided to continue identifying and living as straight, and was happy he did. Mental health professionals should support sexual identity disclosure for men who secretly identify as gay or bisexual, and hope for an opportunity to share this with their loved ones. Asking men who identify as straight to come out as gay or bisexual, however, may cause more psychological harm than good.

In all populations, researchers and practitioners should continue to challenge internalized homophobia. Previous research has established that societal heterosexism causes men of a variety of identities to internalize homophobia. This is strongly related to depression and anxiety (Newcomb and Mustanski 2010; Szymanski and Kashubeck 2008). Stress from homophobia and biphobia is also related to greater substance use (Green and Feinstein 2012). Interestingly, there is only a modest relationship between internalized homophobia and risky sexual behavior, and it has decreased over time (Newcomb and Mustanski 2011). Mental health and substance abuse are key considerations when evaluating internalized homophobia, and should remain priorities for mental health professionals.

Practitioners should continue to help all MSM challenge internalized homophobia, while keeping in mind that gay and bisexual men have different mental health needs than straight MSM. This reflects their greater susceptibility to discrimination relative to straight MSM, as well as their identification with cultures and groups that are marginalized and disadvantaged in American society. Coping with this marginalization can have profound psychological costs (Gonzales, Przedworski, and Henning-Smith 2016; Ward et al. 2014). Gay and bisexual men deserve validation for their identity and alignment with sexual minority cultures. They also need support to combat the marginalization they face, and the effects this has on their mental health. Gay and bisexual men who are secretive about their identity have additional stressors from this secrecy and isolation, requiring additional support. LGBTQ affirmative therapy provides validation for LGBTQ identities and recognizes the structural underpinnings of heteronormativity (Johnson 2012), and is critical for individuals in LGBTQ populations. In contrast, the best way to serve straight MSM is to validate their straightness while also challenging whatever internalized homophobia they experience. They also need support for any stress they experience keeping their sexual encounters secret from most people in their social contexts. Providing mental health support in these ways can help them cope with any guilt or anxiety they experience while still validating their identities. Furthermore, counselors can encourage straight MSM to establish ethical non-monogamous relationships with their women partners. Joe and Rex did so, and described excellent communication and deep intimacy with their women partners. While monogamy is considered a default relationship type in American society, open and/or polyamorous relationships are fulfilling for many people (Schippers 2016). They may be

especially beneficial for straight MSM, who enjoy sex with men but also want to maintain their relationships with their women partners.

Research using nationally representative samples shows that straight MSM do not necessarily have lower levels of psychological wellbeing than other groups of men. This reflects their feelings of belonging in straight culture and their freedom from sexuality-based discrimination and stigma. Straight MSM have lower odds of experiencing generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) than gay or bisexual men, and about equal odds as straight men who never had sex with men (Gattis, Sacco, and Cunningham-Williams 2012). They also do not have significantly different odds of experiencing depression than either gay/bisexual or straight men who never had sex with men (Gattis, Sacco, and Cunningham-Williams 2012). Relatedly, using a different sample, Lourie and Needham (2017) show that there are not significant differences in anxiety or depression between men who (1) identify as exclusively straight, yet report sex with and/or attractions to men, and (2) straight men who never had sex with or attractions to men. Caplan (2017) similarly shows that straight-identified men with same-sex practices and/or attractions do not have significantly higher depression scores than other straight men. Her analyses further suggest that depressive differences are due to sexual identity change, not sexual “discordance.” Worsened mental health due to “discordance” between identity and behavior and/or attraction mostly seems to exist among women and some men who identify as something other than exclusively straight (e.g., mostly straight). These analyses show that straight MSM are not necessarily worse off than other men in terms of mental health. My research suggests that straight men’s happiness with straight culture,



and their subsequent protection from discrimination and stigma, partially explain these findings.

Overall, *research and clinical practice about sexual minority wellbeing should incorporate knowledge about sexual cultures*. This includes broad sexual cultures, such as straight culture—which is dominant in American society—and marginalized gay, bisexual, or queer cultures. It also includes niche sexual subcultures, like those centering enjoyment of age differences between adults (i.e., daddy or cougar dynamics) or various forms of kink (e.g., leather). Some public health research is incorporating a sexual cultures framework, but in the context of minority cultures like gay Bears (Quidley-Rodriguez and Santis 2017). Some research also incorporates network analysis to identify subcultural groupings among gay men and their associated risk behaviors (Prestage et al. 2015). Continuing to do so, including with cultures that are more mainstream (e.g., straight culture), will reflect that individual-level outcomes emerge from particular social contexts. Straight MSM do not associate or identify with a marginalized sexual culture, and consequently experience fewer stressors than gay and bisexual men. They also experience fewer stressors than men who secretly identify as gay or bisexual but tell other people they are straight. Researchers should be careful to not inappropriately generalize findings from samples of MSM who secretly identify as gay or bisexual, but are not open about it due to social pressures. They are different from MSM who genuinely identify as straight, and consequently have different mental health needs. Lastly, straight MSM differ from men who identify as “mostly straight” (Savin-Williams 2017; Savin-Williams and Vrangalova 2013), who are often more open about their sexuality. Due to social stigma and difficulty finding groups that validate their sexual flexibility, individuals who

identify as mostly straight often experience greater mental health concerns (Vrangalova and Savin-Williams 2014). Alignment with, comfort in, and enjoyment of distinct sexual cultures—as well as differential susceptibility to discrimination and stigma as a result—are key differences between these populations.

Addressing the mental health needs of straight MSM requires attention to sexual identities as they intersect with race/ethnicity, migration status, class, and other social locations. Building on the intersectional framework of McCall (2005), Collins (2015), Choo and Ferree (2010), and others, researchers and practitioners should consider how intersecting identities affect individuals' lived experiences. All individuals live in a social structure that grants unearned benefits to some people but not others, which all mental health professionals need to take into account (Grzanka and Miles 2016). This is especially important in neoliberal social and economic contexts, which treat systemic social issues as individual problems. This has in turn affected gendered subjectivities, which has particularly severe consequences for men who are marginalized on the basis of their class, race/ethnicity, and/or migration status (Adam 2016). As Adam (2016) states, “the rational, aggressive, competitive individual of the capitalist marketplace has a set of survival skills that intersect with social constructions of masculinity and which are part of making oneself into a man who is credible, worthy, even desirable,” which facilitates risky behaviors that increase HIV risk. This, combined with (1) neoliberal individualism which severs community and network ties and (2) institutional classism and racism that make it more difficult for men who are poor and/or of color to access health care, helps explain why black and Latino men have vastly higher rates of HIV infection than white men. In short, only by paying attention to the lived experiences of MSM within structural

contexts can researchers and mental health practitioners address their needs. The men I talked to—most of whom are white and middle-class—face different and fewer structural challenges than most poor men of color. An *intersectional sexual cultures framework* should inform how researchers and practitioners address the needs of straight MSM, as well as other populations.

There is little research other than my own about rural straight MSM, but research about rural LGBTQ people indicates that they are not worse off than their urban counterparts. Nationally representative research shows that rural and urban gays and lesbians do not differ in terms of wellbeing (Wienke and Hill 2013). Qualitative research on rural LGBTQ populations (Gray, Johnson, and Gilley 2016), including youth (Gray 2009), reinforces this finding. This research, as well as my own, suggests that mental health researchers and practitioners need to take into account geographic location when examining the wellbeing of populations. In other words, straight MSM should not be told that the secret to happiness is coming out as gay or bisexual and moving to a city to reduce stigma. They identify as straight and masculine, and enjoy their rural contexts. What would best benefit them is validating these parts of their identity, while also challenging whatever internalized homophobia they experience.

### *Theoretical Implications and Directions for Future Research*

#### *Heterosexual and queer sexual cultures*

A sexual cultures framework helps reveal more about heterosexuality, which until recently has been neglected in research. Heterosexuality is an identity, an institution, a way of relating to the world, and a culture. Like all cultures, it has institutions that

undergird it and groups that feel strongly connected to it. Participants highlighted their experiences with straight culture is and how it operates. Most straight men do not have sex with other men, of course. Those who do, however, like the men in this project, show how and why many men come to identify as straight and masculine. Sexual identity does not simply indicate attractions or sexual practices, nor individual meaning-making processes mostly isolated from the rest of the world. It also reflects alignment with some communities and cultures over others.

For this reason, straight MSM are not queer. Participants happily aligned themselves with normativity: heterosexuality and masculinity. Their sex with men did not detract from this. There is nothing inherently transgressive about male-male sex.<sup>16</sup> Yet, collectively, participants' experiences "queer" understandings of sexuality and gender. They show that men's sexuality and masculinity are flexible over the life course, and that heterosexual identification reflects cultural alignment rather than biological destiny. Attractions may very well reflect biological potential, but identification as straight and masculine is in large part a social product. Participants *became* straight and masculine through socialization in institutions that undergird straight culture. They *maintained* these identities through strategic life decisions, like forming families with women partners, and by engaging in emotion boundary work with other men. By studying normativity, we can expand queer scholarship (Stein and Plummer 1996; Warner 1993). Queerness and normativity are not binary opposites, but rather complex configurations in a 3-D matrix.

### *Intersectionality, habitus, and sexual cultures*

---

<sup>16</sup> Indeed, today some masculine, gay-identified, and mostly white men align themselves with white nationalism (Minkowitz 2017; see also Halberstam 2011 for a historical examination).

An intersectional lens is necessary to understand how and why individuals come to identify with certain cultures over others. Individuals' physical and social locations—that is, where they live and the identities or statuses they have—give them particular forms of habitus. This, in turn, facilitates alignment with certain cultures over others. The men I interviewed in this study have a specific rural, masculine, straight, white habitus. Intersectionality theorists argue that the effects of identities are not additive, but are rather dynamic and multiplicative (McCall 2015; Choo and Ferree 2010). The same is true for different forms of habitus: rural, masculine, straight, white habitus is not simply each of those components added together. It is a distinct way of living, perceiving, and relating to the world, which both reflects and reinforces participants' alignment with rural, white, straight culture. Future research should continue to integrate the insights of intersectionality and Bourdieusian theories. Their combination can help explain complex phenomena such as perceptions, social practices, and cultural alignment.

### *Sex and sociology*

Sex research is marginalized within sociology (Irvine 2015; Schnabel 2018) and academia more broadly (Irvine 2012). Although sociological studies of sexuality reveal social processes with complex interpersonal, organizational, and structural effects (e.g., Hoang 2015; see also Bernstein 2013), sex research is marginalized. This ghettoizes sex research at the margins of sociology. Partly for this reason, many sociological sex researchers have—counter-intuitively—excised discussions or narratives of sexual pleasure from their projects (Jones 2018), with a few key exceptions (e.g., Armstrong, England, and Fogarty 2012).

This project sought to challenge the trajectory of de-sexing sociology research. Participants shared sexually and emotionally intimate narratives, which have significance for understanding complicated social processes. For instance, by hearing David's experience of his FWB giving him an enema before topping and cumming inside him, we can understand the deeply intimate relationships straight men can form with other men. Few other projects have examined these types of intimate relationships in depth. By casually asking questions about giving and receiving oral or anal sex, we can see how men associate gendered meanings—or not—with particular sexual acts. In so doing we can see how their practices and interpretations reflect and reinforce their alignment with straight culture. And more broadly, by hearing about their sex lives, we can see how practices individuals see as deeply personal are actually affected by social processes, institutions, and cultures. What individuals think of as deeply personal are in fact highly influenced by society, in varying ways and to different extents. Sexuality is a particularly fruitful site to examine this.

*A note of caution*

I do not argue that all people should identify as straight and gender normative. Most do, of course, regardless of their attractions or practices. Instead, I argue that we need to examine why individuals identify as straight to understand more about heterosexuality. My previous research shows that 2.6% of straight men 15-44 have reported oral and/or anal sex with men (Silva and Whaley 2017).<sup>17</sup> By talking to similar

---

<sup>17</sup> This is likely an underestimate, given that same-sex sexual practices and attractions are substantially underreported, even in anonymous surveys (Coffman, Coffman, and Ericson 2017). Greater survey privacy results in much higher estimates of sexual minorities (Robertson et al. 2018). Further, the survey I used,

men in this project, I explored what draws men to heterosexuality, how they maintain their straight identities, and what institutions uphold heterosexuality.

Ideally our social world would be without gendered or sexualized pressures and constraints. The crushing weight of heteronormativity and the gender binary would not be present in a perfect world. Alas, we do not live in a perfect world. How people understand and express their gender and sexuality is deeply affected by social context. Social forces affect the options that are available to individuals, as well as the ways in which individuals understand themselves. Some individuals take a non-normative path and openly express themselves as queer in terms of gender and/or sexuality. Most do not. We need to change the very fabric of society to not favor some sexualities (heterosexuality) and gender expressions (gender normativity) over others. Then individuals could align themselves with sexual and gendered cultures with far fewer constraints than there are now. As we work towards this goal, we need to acknowledge that many people today genuinely enjoy alignment with straight culture due in part to heteronormativity that structures almost every institution and social context. We need to eliminate heteronormativity and heterosexism, not shame straight MSM for having an “incorrect” identity. Criticizing straight MSM for their identity ignores the impacts of structural heteronormativity. Imposing identities on the men in this project, or any other individuals, is not good for anyone. It is not good for straight MSM, as they do not want that. It is also not good for LGBTQ people, who would be forced to deal with men that do not want to be a part of their sexual communities. In short, we need to acknowledge and validate the identities—and sexual cultures—with which individuals identify. At the

---

like most others, did not ask about mutual masturbation. For both of these reasons, the actual population of MSM is likely much higher.

same time, we need to challenge heteronormativity and other sexual and gender pressures. Doing so will ensure that individuals face fewer social constraints.

### *Generational and life course factors*

The sample was skewed toward older ages, reflecting generational *and* life course dynamics. Many participants came of age during 1950-1980, a time Seidman (2002) describes as some of the most difficult years to express gender or sexual difference in America. This affected how participants were socialized, what options were available to them, and the opportunities they felt they had. About a third noted generation-specific heteronormativity as a key reason for identifying as straight and masculine. Generational factors, of course, affect everyone. So, even though only a third specifically noted such influences, all participants were affected by generational factors to at least some extent. While American society today is still deeply heteronormative, today there is much greater social visibility and acceptance of LGBTQ people. Consequently, youth today have relatively more options for identifying and expressing themselves as something other than straight and gender normative—even as severe stigma and inequality remains.

We cannot reduce older men's identification with straightness and masculinity simply as a product of their times, however, for two main reasons. First, a third of participants were younger than 50, showing that alignment with straight culture transcends generational divides. Second, some men in older cohorts do identify as gay or bisexual and have for decades—so there are factors other than generational ones at play. Further, generational influences affect everyone of all identities, so dismissing older men's straight identification would logically necessitate dismissing *everyone's* identities



for one reason or another—including younger gay men who have some attractions to women. Obviously we should not do this. For the older participants, generation was one factor of many that encouraged alignment with straight culture. Gender and sexuality are both constrained *and* enabled in different ways across distinct time periods, and this affects all people.

Nationally representative samples also show that many young and middle-aged men who report sex with or attractions to men identify as straight. According to the 2011-2013 National Survey of Family Growth, approximately 52.4% of American men aged 15-44—who have attractions to men and/or two or more male sexual partners—actually identify as straight (Silva and Whaley 2017). Breaking this down further, 43.6% of men 15-44 who have ever had sex with a man identify as straight, and 20.7% of men 15-44 who have had two or more male sexual partners identify as straight. Similarly, a different survey of young adults shows that about 40.9% of adult men in their 20s and 30s—who ever had sex with a man and/or reported romantic attraction to a man—identify as straight (Silva 2017). These surveys show that there are many young and middle-aged men who have sex with men and/or experience attractions to them, and who also identify as straight. Conservative attitudes about gender and sexuality, political conservatism, and religiosity—hallmarks of many straight cultures—are associated with straight identification in these samples of young and middle-aged men. Thus, alignment with straight culture is not merely generational.

Additionally, most themes I discussed did not have clear generational patterns. The main exception was the reason participants had sex with men. About a third of the sample, mostly older men, began having sex with men or increased their sexual activity

with other men because of the aging process. A handful experienced erectile dysfunction, whereas the rest reported that their wives lost interest in sex as they aged and/or experienced health issues. Thus, a major reason there were more older men in the sample *is because the aging process itself encouraged straight men to have sex with other men*. So, it is not necessarily that participants identified as straight because they were older. Instead, many *had sex with men* because they were older. Thus, *generational factors and the aging process were both reasons participants skewed older*.<sup>18</sup>

Many individuals in their late 50s and older still have sex (Lindau et al. 2008; Lochlainn and Kenny 2013; Malani et al. 2018), though the aging process often changes their sexual abilities, desires, and practices (Galinsky, McClintock, and Waite 2014). The representative National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project indicates that men 57-85 (divided into three age categories) view sex as much more important and desirable than women in their respective cohorts (Waite et al. 2009). While researchers recognize that straight men partnered to women may turn to extramarital sex, few if any have considered that they may turn to *men*, as many participants in this project did.

Future research in aging and sexuality should investigate *how the aging process itself can actually facilitate same-sex intimacy*. Other than research on older LGBTQ people, there is little investigation into older people's same-sex sexuality. Practitioners who work with older, sexually active clients should recognize sexual flexibility among straight men, and offer services accordingly. Relationship counselors, in particular, should gain competency discussing ethical non-monogamy with clients. Open and

---

<sup>18</sup> Another reason older men participated more is because they had more free time. Most were retired and not taking care of children, making it easier to find time to interview.

polyamorous relationships (Sheff 2014; Schippers 2016) may be particularly well suited for couples in which one partner desires more sex than the other.

### *Future directions for research*

Research should continue to examine sexual cultures, especially normative ones. Although there is rich research on sexual cultures of LGBTQ people, especially in urban areas (e.g., Barrett 2017; Hale 1997; Hennen 2008; Orne 2017; Rubin 2000), research on normative sexuality usually does not frame it in terms of sexual culture. Exceptions include Ward's (2015) content analysis of urban white heterosexual masculinity and Pascoe's (2011) ethnography of heterosexuality and masculinity in high school, which shows the workings of straight culture more broadly. Because heterosexuality is normative, most people do not perceive it as a sexual culture. Narratives from this project show that there are indeed straight sexual cultures, with institutions upholding them and communities connected to them. I specifically examined *rural white* heterosexual culture. Undoubtedly, there are other heterosexual sexual cultures. Straight cultures share extensive overlap, as they centralize heterosexual identification and—usually—normalize gender inequalities. They also, however, differ based on social context and population.

While some studies *do* examine heterosexual cultures, they are usually not framed as such. Examples that incorporate a cross-national lens include Gonzalez-Lopez's (2005) study of sexuality and gender among Mexican immigrants, and Schalet's (2011) exploration of sex education in the U.S. and the Netherlands. Projects that demonstrate variation among straight cultures within the same country include Vasquez's (2015) examination of social and structural factors that encourage American Latinx endogamy,

and Diefendorf's (2015) study of American evangelism. Studies such as these examine heterosexual cultures in different contexts. Continuing to examine straight cultures, while also explicitly framing them *as* sexual cultures, will help reinforce that heterosexuality as it appears in the social world is not a biological given. Regardless of what attractions individuals have, heterosexuality is an identity, an institution, a set of social practices and experiences, and a culture. It both reinforces, and is reinforced by, the gender binary. Heterosexuality differs across contexts and populations, and various institutions and communities uphold it. My study helps highlight this. Researchers should continue to examine the rich cultures of sexual minorities, while also turning the gaze inward: to heterosexuality itself.

## APPENDIX

### I'LL SEND YOU MY [DICK] PIC

You're getting me aroused here, you know [laughs]. In fact, I'm stroking my cock as we're talking here. (Cain)

Cain was one of several men who solicited me for sex. Participants did so for four main reasons. The first two reveal the constraints they faced finding male sexual partners, and the second two highlight complexities of the research process. First, finding discreet sexual partners of their “type” was difficult, so participants jumped on any possible opportunity. They knew I would not reveal their identity, and felt that they might as well solicit me to see what would happen. Second, many were used to discussing their male-male sex mostly with other male sexual partners. Several did not have an existing framework for talking to another man about their sex without trying to have sex with that man. Third, a handful of participants—Cain included—formed an emotional attachment to me. They saw me as a therapist or confidant as much as a researcher. One way they channeled those feelings was through sexualization. Fourth, several likely sexualized me to reduce power differentials between us. They provided information to me that I could potentially use to destroy their lives. Hitting on me may have helped them feel more in control of the interview process. Regardless of the exact reason, 12 participants sexualized the research process. How I navigated this provides insight into gendered power dynamics that affect research.

Numerous gender and sexuality researchers have written about their experiences with sexualization during ethnographic fieldwork or interviews. Many can broadly be organized into two main categories. First are projects with women who research men: Pascoe (2011), Barber (2016), and Hoang (2015) are examples. Many male participants

sexualize women researchers in part because this helps them maintain a sense of control. This helps explain why even some gay men sexualize women (Rupp and Taylor 2011). Men's refusal to respect women's professional boundaries is an indication of how gendered power dynamics negatively affect women researchers. Men who sexualize women researchers both *reflect* and *reinforce* gender inequalities.

Second are those projects in which gay, bisexual, or queer men research other men. When male participants sexualize them, researchers can navigate the situation more comfortably because fewer gendered dynamics exist. Because of this, some researchers can comfortably have sex with participants without pressure and without worrying that doing so will negatively affect their project. Through sexual relationships these researchers can learn more about participants and their communities. Hennen (2008) and Orne (2017), for instance, sexually integrated themselves into many of the groups they studied, giving them more insight into those sexual cultures. Experiencing fewer gendered power dynamics gives men who study other men more flexibility when they experience sexualization, and greater ability to set boundaries with participants.

Few gay, bisexual, or queer men researchers have discussed sexualization in the context of *not* having sex with participants, however. While plenty of queer male researchers have collected data without having sex with their participants, obviously, few have analytically reflected on this. I do so here to highlight how being a man made it fairly unproblematic to set boundaries with participants without the research being negatively affected. I never had sex with any participants, and always politely declined any such offers. My usual strategy was to nonchalantly change the conversation, or to engage in active listening to neutralize the situation. As an example of the latter, I would

sometimes say things like “it sounds like you find some slim men attractive if they’re masculine” if participants hit on me in person. Over the phone I would make comments like “it’s totally understandable that you’re feeling aroused, since a lot of men feel that way when they talk about sex.” Making unsexy, professional statements like this helped to de-sexualize interviews. Strategies like this usually worked, but not always. While I sometimes felt deeply uncomfortable, especially with Cain when I first met him, I usually enjoyed talking to participants. I never felt unsafe and only rarely felt awkward or uncomfortable when they sexualized me. This was because I experienced few gendered power dynamics with them, and was more easily able to set boundaries with them. Even though I was not an “insider” in ways that researchers are when they have sex with participants, the men I talked to still opened up to me. By virtue of being a man researching other men, I could usually set boundaries fairly easily without feeling as though I was harming rapport.

*“50 Shades of Cain”: Sexualization and Emotional Attachment*

Cain called me dozens of times over the course of several years and solicited me for sex just as many times. Our relationship became friendlier, though still professional, the longer he and I knew one another. It got off to a rocky start: he tried to have phone sex with me shortly after our first interview. Despite numerous attempts to redirect the conversation and politely end the call, I was only able to convince him to hang up when he said he was close to orgasm. Cain continued calling me in the weeks after the initial interview, and I became more comfortable establishing firm boundaries. He found that acceptable, since as he said “it just seems to take the edge off when I talk about it.” While

he never truly stopped sexualizing me, we got to a point where I used humor to de-sexualize awkward situations. For instance, he once sent me a photo of his erect penis. In a follow-up interview he asked if I had received it, I said I did, and we both laughed softly. Cain shortly thereafter left a short voicemail, and slapped something (presumably his penis) against the phone and said “can you guess what that is?” before hanging up.

Although Cain was difficult at first, he and I eventually reached a point where we could laugh together at him sexualizing our conversations. For instance, a few months after the interview he called me and said several times that he was “stroking his cock.” He also sighed in pleasure several times, asked me if I was interested to “share” married men with their wives, and expressed disappointment that I lived far enough away that he and I could not become “regular buds.” After I did my usual boundary work, he laughed and said he noticed me saying things like “it sounds like you’re really aroused by that.” I laughed in return, and said that is part of my job as a researcher. As we got to know one another better, we became more comfortable talking about our relationship dynamics. He nonetheless continued to leave voicemails, like the following:

Hey man, this is Cain. I'm horned as fuck, man. I took a Viagra, I fucked my woman, got her pussy juice on my cock. I got a Craigslist ad up right now and I'm about to fuck a hot college twink. I want him to lick the pussy juice off of my cock and then I want to fuck him with this rock hard daddy cock. Fuck I want you to listen to my cock as I cycle through the ads. [Slaps something, probably his penis, against the receiver.] Oh [airy voice]. Fuck. Just touching base man. Take care.

Hey man, it's Cain. I want to fuckin' bear my most inner secrets to you man. I want to fuckin' give you every detail that you want for your study. I want to fuckin' open up my mind and just let you probe my brain. Fuck, call me when you can.

Hey man, just checkin' in with you. Ready for the sequel 50 shades of Cain baby.



Hey man, it's Cain. I may be traveling through your area possibly tomorrow. Are you still going to be around? You know what would be fuckin' hot? Is if I put up a Craigslist ad or something and found a twink and fucked him at your place and you could watch. You could watch this fuckin' hot daddy in action. I'm fuckin' horned, man. Shit, let me know what you think, or maybe you got a bud that needs to get fucked. I'd like to do it. And have you watch it, I think that would be so fuckin' hot. Hit me back when you can, bye.

I wanna fuck some fuckin' hot male ass. I got to shoot a couple of times with my wife, but she won't let me penetrate her anymore. And so I need to fuckin' penetrate. Mmm, fuck, I hope you come to [deleted] because I want to penetrate your fuckin' hot ass man. Call me when you can.

I usually ignored these voicemails, and would often laugh about them when he and I did talk again. I felt comfortable not only maintaining boundaries, but laughing with him at how much he loved to sexualize our relationship.

Even as Cain left voicemails like the above, he indicated an emerging emotional attachment to me. This began with him giving me his number, after months of blocking it when he called. During one phone conversation he explained that he could see himself becoming emotionally attached to me, since he enjoyed our conversations. He later shared a Craigslist ad he posted, which noted that he wanted to put his “baby batter” in some guy’s “bake oven.” We both laughed at this. In response, he said “I love to hear you laugh.” He then immediately said “OK, see you later,” and hung up. Cain increasingly made statements that indicated emotional attachment and trust, even as he continued to sexualize our conversations. Cain even began calling me “baby” with increasing frequency, and at one point said he wanted me to move close to him so he could “woo” me. He even sent me a photograph of his face, which was a remarkable gesture of trust from someone who initially blocked his phone number from me. Indeed, he expressed that he would continue to hit on me during our phone conversations, but not too much because he did not want our conversations to end.

Cain and I eventually met in person when he drove through my area after visiting relatives. He paid for it—as he said—to compensate me for “therapy” services. As he was driving back home, Cain called and said he was tempted to hit on me the entire time we were having lunch. He also asked me if he is the type of guy I find physically attractive. I in fact did not find him attractive, but I did not want to hurt his feelings. Instead of saying that directly, I said he had been my research participant for so long that I could not imagine him as anything else. He continued asking me his original question, but rephrased. I continued telling him my own answer, rephrased. Eventually, after he kept pushing, I told him “to answer your question more directly, not really, not quite.” He simply said “OK.” We talked for about 30 more seconds, and then he said he had better let me go. We both said it was great meeting the other, and then we hung up. He continued to call me, even after I moved to Oregon, but I eventually stopped returning his calls and texts. I set up the ultimate boundary: dissolving contact.

#### *Dick Pics, Sexual Solicitation, and Masturbating on the Phone*

Most participants were not as persistent as Cain. Nonetheless, maintaining sexual and emotional boundaries between participants and myself was an ongoing effort. Some sought to have sex with me, whereas others wanted to become friends. I navigated these situations as professionally as I could. These situations show that there is quite a bit of behind-the-scenes work for sexuality researchers, and that it is often easier for men to navigate than women.

Mike drove from his hometown to the university library, where I interviewed him. His emails following the interview show his appreciation of being able to participate and his desire to establish a friendship:

I wanna say again thanks for listening to me. You have no idea how much you helped me. I have been needing to talk to somebody for quite a while.

If you don't mind me saying so you made it so easy to talk to. I know it was just a research project but I am so glad you were the one to spend the time with. I certainly don't want to interfere with ethics but if there is ever a time when we could get together and just talk I would really like that. Sometimes I just need someone to talk to. I am not a stalker, lol, so I won't bother you from here on out. Thanks again. This meant a lot to me.

How are you doing sweetie. Is it alright for me to email you without talking about the interview? I just really like the connection that I have with you.

Thank you for your concern. You are such a sweet guy and I would have to say that I would give anything to have a guy like you in my life to love. Whoever gets you will get something really special.

Mike expressed by far the most emotional attachment of any participant. His comment about wanting “a guy like you in my life to love” was a remarkable departure from sentiments he expressed during the interview, about requiring non-romantic sex. Even as he did this, he also expressed a desire to hook up:

If this question is too personal, I will understand. Are you interested enough to experience what I have talked about? ... Please know that anything I offer is not for a relationship but to just help a friend out with one of mans oldest needs. While I would never interfere with anything you have going on with someone else I want you to know that I would be more than happy to help you out if you would want. Either way this will not interfere with our discussion. I like you and still wanna continue helping with your project.

How are you my sweet man? I hope this day finds you in good health with plenty of good things in store for you. I have found you to be as sweet as you are sexy and I certainly wish nothing but good things for you. I hope to see you soon.

I also wanna say that I may have a hard time sitting across from you. With you being so nice and all but if you are willing to brave it so am I. Lol.

Mike was unique in that he expressed a desire for a connection that was emotional, as well as sexual. In later phone conversations, Mike indicated disappointment that I moved to Oregon because he wanted me to “top” him. To him and other participants, I expressed that ethical boundaries prevented me from establishing relationships with them. None sounded offended, and I was fairly easily able to establish boundaries without sacrificing rapport.

Several other participants sexualized the interview too, though I did not develop an extended relationship with them like I did Cain. One reason I did not is because I knew how time-consuming my relationship with Cain had been, and did not want to replicate that. My experience with Cain taught me to not develop extended contact with any participants. Mark, Matt, and Billy also hit on me, for instance, but I was able to navigate those without issue. Jon was somewhat more complicated. While I did a phone interview with Jon, I also met him in person at a coffee shop when he was traveling through my town several months later. Jon later sent me messages like the following:

So when are you going to come over so I can finally get you naked?

Hey man. I don't suppose I can talk you into fucking? ;)

Too bad you're so damned good looking

You're hot as hell.

Jon was very busy between his family and ranch, so he did not contact me very often.

When he did, however, he made it clear that he wanted to have sex.

Jordan was perhaps the most similar to Cain in his sexualization, sharing the following during our phone interview:

If we were together today, I would go down on you but I would ask you not to ejaculate in my mouth. And it's a real turn on for me, I would want you to

ejaculate, I would want to see you shoot your cum all over. I'd want to help you do that in every way, I'd want to feel your cock throbbing in my hand while you shot your load.

Like I can tell you right now, this is like I'm comin' on to you, just talkin' to you. I like your voice, I want to see you. I want to see your body, I want to see you naked. I want to see your dick.

Let me ask you another question. Would you hook up with a 63 year old?

After the interview Jordan texted me and said “hey Tony... I had to tell you... when I got out of the car and stood up... I realized I had precum all over the head of my cock... I could feel it when I walked.” I thanked Jordan for the interview via text, and immediately ended contact. He was harmless, but I did not want to deal with his solicitations.

Phone interviews did not prevent participants from sexualizing the research. For instance, Ernie called several days after our interview and asked if I wanted to have phone sex with him. He did not sound offended when I firmly said no, and was actually quite polite through the entire conversation. Relatedly, during our interview Bob said “don't take this the wrong way, but you sound hot as fuck. I'm just gonna put that out there [laughs].” He also asked me if I was naked conducting the interview. Val actually offered to take me to a sex club: “it does get exciting watching other guys having sex. I guess that's one of the things I like about [a favorite sex club]. But if you ever get up this way, definitely should check it out. If you want somebody to go along with, let me know.” Despite the initial awkwardness, I was able to set boundaries with these participants without issue.

Two participants also discussed how they masturbated during the interview or immediately after. Over email, Glenn shared “I'm masturbating thinking of telling you my answers,” and later messaged “I came pretty hard to it haha. You get off? I hope it

wasn't too one sided.” Lastly, Jeremy also expressed that he was hard during the interview because “I find that talking about it, since I've never talked about it with anybody before, has become very stimulating for some reason.” Jeremy later indicated that he planned to masturbate to the sound of my voice after the interview:

J: Here's the funny thing, when I do and I don't mean any disrespect whatsoever, when I do it, it's gonna be your voice that I'm going to be thinking about. The experience of talking with you has aroused me, it will be your voice and what I imagine you might look like that I'll be thinking about when I jerk off.

I: Well I hope you enjoy it.

J: I'm already enjoying it [laughs].

All these experiences of sexualization were playful, but required emotion work to redirect conversations to a more appropriate topic or tone. Thankfully, I was able to set boundaries fairly easily. This never negatively affected rapport or data collection.

Because I am a man, I could laugh off sexual harassment with little consequence. Many women researchers experience sexual harassment that is potentially dangerous, demeaning, or that could prevent them from doing their jobs. As we heard from women who shared their stories as part of the Me Too campaign, women's attempts to professionally de-sexualize situations sometimes anger men—resulting in retaliation. Other times men simply ignore their requests and continue to harass them. Thus, sexual harassment for women is always potentially threatening. Women researchers experience gendered power dynamics that men researchers usually do not. These power dynamics, and the sexual harassment that may result, reflect broader social inequalities between women and men. Gendered power dynamics affect how many men treat women in almost any context, including that involving research. Most women cannot simply laugh off sexual harassment, as it could involve a serious threat to their bodies or psychological

wellbeing. Given that this was not present in my interactions with participants, it was easier for me to ignore sexual harassment.

My ability to ignore sexual harassment may also reflect power differentials between participants and I, given that I knew about their secretive practices. If they stalked, assaulted, or threatened me, I could report them to the police—and in so doing reveal their secretive sex with men. This in turn would destroy many of their relationships, such as those with their women partners. Thus, my knowledge about a secretive element of their lives was itself a measure of safety.

### *Never Open Your Email in Public*

While sexualization did at times pose difficulties, the most challenging aspect of the research was simply finding willing interviewees. While recruiting between 2014-2017, I received 654 responses from Craigslist advertisements. The fact that so many men emailed me, but did not follow up, reinforces how secretive and difficult-to-access this population is. This 654 figure does not include men who were ineligible to participate (e.g., if a man emailed and said he identified as gay). It also does not include snarky comments, like the following:

This is a ruse to find hookups, right?

Oregon pollster? Sound[s] like someone hoping to twist some figures to promote the gay agenda....

Wow. There's an angle I haven't seen in a while. Nice try but your act has been done before.

Emails like this were common. Of the 654 contacts, 36 scheduled interviews but later either cancelled or never followed up. Two of them called me on the phone before

hanging up just minutes into the conversation. One had previously asked if he could give me oral and requested a dick pic. Relatedly, 26 men refused a telephone interview or sought more privacy. Another three only agreed to participate with compensation, which I could not provide. Lastly, at least 36 men<sup>19</sup> asked me for sex in return for participation and/or sent dick pics, and never followed up on an offer for a non-sexual interview. Here is a sampling of emails I received:

Well i know this is really forward but would u be up for gettin ur cock sucked too? ... Are you still not up for getting some of the best head you ever got after the interview.

i AM MORE INTERESTED IN MEETING UP WITH YOU FOR SEX

I am a white engaged guy, looking for some DL fun. I love using toys on my ass so a real cock would be nice. I also love sucking my roommates dick, but would like a new one to suck on. Lastly I LOVE HEAD. So if you still looking lets meet and have some fun. I am 28 have some thinning hair but I am a college student and love to use my office or meet on campus too. I am 5ft10 225lbs.

Given that many emails contained “dick pics”, which is slang for photos of penises, I quickly learned to never open my email in public.

### *Benefits for Participants*

Most participants did not sexualize the interview. Many shared that they participated because they wanted to talk to someone about a topic they could discuss with almost no one else. Thus, while I benefited from them sharing details about their lives, they benefited from being able to talk to someone. As Connor explained over email,

I enjoyed our interview yesterday, thanks for doing this and getting a hold of me. I am not sure how old you are but at 43 I don't get to have very many deep conversations anymore. That is one thing I really miss about high school and college. I would enjoy talking again about anything thing on the subject. I don't

---

<sup>19</sup> The number is likely higher than 36, but due to technical email issues I was not able to track some correspondence from 2014-2015.



mean to be stalky or needy. You have probably got that a few times since opening yourself up doing this study.

Connor expressed a desire to continue talking, though he clarified that he understood the need for professional boundaries. Similarly, Mike explained that,

Like I said, I've never talked about this with anybody. You are the only person to ever [have] heard this. And actually the reason why I wanted to do this is because I have to get it out of my system and tell somebody. Because I've always wanted to be able to talk to somebody, and you don't know who to talk to. And so I appreciate that, that's the only reason why I'm doin' this. Because I just need to get it outta my system, and probably once I get it all told and stuff like that, I won't never think about it. I'll walk away, and I'll think oh, that's a load off me because I was able to tell someone how I feel. And then I'm done with that part of it. I need to just get it out of my system, so.

Bob relatedly shared that talking let him take a “weight off me”:

Actually do be honest with you this is taken a whole lot of weight off me, just to be able to talk about stuff. Where I don't feel like I'm bein' judged, and I don't feel like I'm gonna be persecuted because I'm saying what I'm saying, and I appreciate that very much. I felt like it would free my mind of so many things I need to get off my mind, and you have enabled me to do that. And I greatly appreciate it more than you will ever know. All the things you've asked me have freed up my mind more than you will ever imagine.

Bob also emailed me this after we talked: “Tony I enjoyed talking with you today. I felt so liberated afterwards. Thank you so very much. Hopefully we can become friends. I felt like I have known you all my life. Please don't hesitate to call on me if I can help in anyway. Your friend [deleted].” These narratives reinforce that straight MSM need to be able to talk about their experiences without judgment and without anyone pressuring them to come out as gay or bisexual. They are straight men aligned with straight culture. Like most individuals, they need people in their lives with whom they can discuss their practices without judgment. Their appreciation for the interview shows that mental health professionals can help straight MSM by helping them challenge internalized homophobia and by giving them space to talk without judgment.

## REFERENCES CITED

- Adam, Barry. 2000. "Love and Sex in Constructing Identity among Men Who Have Sex with Men." *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* 5(4):325–339.
- Adam, Barry D. 2016. "Neoliberalism, Masculinity, and HIV Risk." *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 13(4):321–29.
- Aguilar, Jade. 2017. "Pegging and the Heterosexualization of Anal Sex: An Analysis of Savage Love Advice." *Queer Studies in Media & Popular Culture* 2(3):275–292.
- Annes, Alexis and Meredith Redlin. 2012. "The Careful Balance of Gender and Sexuality: Rural Gay Men, the Heterosexual Matrix, and 'Effemophobia.'" *Journal of Homosexuality* 59(2):256–88.
- Armstrong, Elizabeth A., Paula England, and Alison C. K. Fogarty. 2012. "Accounting for Women's Orgasm and Sexual Enjoyment in College Hookups and Relationships." *American Sociological Review* 77(3):435–62.
- Barber, Kristen. 2016. *Styling Masculinity: Gender, Class, and Inequality in the Men's Grooming Industry*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.
- Barrett, Rusty. 2017. *From Drag Queens to Leathermen: Language, Gender, and Gay Male Subcultures*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Bederman, Gail. 1996. *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bernstein, Mary. 2013. "The Sociology of Sexualities: Taking Stock of the Field." *Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews* 42(1):22–31.
- Bird, Sharon R. 1996. "Welcome to the Men's Club: Homosociality and the Maintenance of Hegemonic Masculinity." *Gender & Society* 10(2):120–32.
- Boag, Peter. 2011. *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Boag, Peter. 2003. *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2003. *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2016. "Reply to Professor Fenelon and Adding Emotion to My Materialist RSS Theory." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 2(2):243–247.

- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, Carla Goar, and David Embrick. 2006. "When Whites Flock Together: The Social Psychology of White Habitus." *Critical Sociology* 32(2-3):229-254.
- Boulden, Walter. 2001. "Gay Men Living in a Rural Environment." *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 12(3/4):63.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1989. "Social Space and Symbolic Power." *Sociological Theory* 7(1):14-25.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1985. "The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups." *Theory and Society* 14(6):723-744.
- Branson-Potts, Hailey. 2018. "In California's Rural, Conservative North, There Are Big Dreams for Cleaving the State." *Los Angeles Times*, March 17.
- Bridges, Tristan and C. J. Pascoe. 2016. "Masculinities and Post-Homophobias." Pp. 412-23 in *Exploring Masculinities: Identity, Inequality, Continuity, and Change*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Brown-Saracino, Japonica. 2018. *How Places Make Us: Novel LBQ Identities in Four Small Cities*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Bump, Philip. 2014. "There Really Are Two Americas. An Urban One and a Rural One." *The Washington Post*, October 21.
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2016. "Average Hours per Day Parents Spent Caring for and Helping Household Children as Their Main Activity."
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2015. "Average Minutes per Day Men and Women Spent in Household Activities."
- Burke, Kelsy. 2016. *Christians under Covers: Evangelicals and Sexual Pleasure on the Internet*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.
- Campbell, Hugh and Michael Mayerfeld Bell. 2000. "The Question of Rural Masculinities." *Rural Sociology* 65(4):532-546.
- Canaday, Margot. 2009. *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Cantú, Lionel. 2009. *The Sexuality of Migration: Border Crossings and Mexican Immigrant Men*. edited by N. Naples and S. Vidal-Ortiz. New York: New York University Press.

- Caplan, Zoe. 2017. "The Problem with Square Pegs: Sexual Orientation Concordance as a Predictor of Depressive Symptoms." *Society and Mental Health* 7(2):105–20.
- Carrillo, Héctor. 2017. *Pathways of Desire: The Sexual Migration of Mexican Gay Men*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Carrillo, Héctor and Jorge Fontdevila. 2014. "Border Crossings and Shifting Sexualities among Mexican Gay Immigrant Men: Beyond Monolithic Conceptions." *Sexualities* 17(8):919–938.
- Carrillo, Héctor and Amanda Hoffman. 2016. "From MSM to Heteroflexibilities: Non-Exclusive Straight Male Identities and Their Implications for HIV Prevention and Health Promotion." *Global Public Health* 11(7–8):923–36.
- Carrillo, Héctor and Amanda Hoffman. 2018. "'Straight with a Pinch of Bi': The Construction of Heterosexuality as an Elastic Category among Adult US Men." *Sexualities* 21(1–2):90–108.
- Charlton, Brittany M., Heather L. Corliss, Donna Spiegelman, Kerry Williams, and S. Bryn Austin. 2016. "Changes in Reported Sexual Orientation Following US States Recognition of Same-Sex Couples." *American Journal of Public Health* 106(12):2202–4.
- Chauncey, George. 2008. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. New York: Basic Books.
- Choo, Hae Yeon and Myra Marx Ferree. 2010. "Practicing Intersectionality in Sociological Research: A Critical Analysis of Inclusions, Interactions, and Institutions in the Study of Inequalities." *Sociological Theory* 28(2):129–149.
- Coffman, Katherine, Lucas Coffman, and Keith Marzelli Ericson. 2017. "The Size of the LGBT Population and the Magnitude of Antigay Sentiment Are Substantially Underestimated." *Management Science* 63(10):3168–3186.
- Connell, Raewyn. 1987. *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Connell, Raewyn. 2005. *Masculinities*. 2nd ed. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Copen, Casey E., Anjani Chandra, and Isaedmarie Febo-Vazquez. 2016. "Sexual Behavior, Sexual Attraction, and Sexual Orientation Among Adults Aged 18-44 in the United States: Data From the 2011-2013 National Survey of Family Growth." *National Health Statistics Reports* (88):1–14.

- Courtenay, Will. 2006. "Rural Men's Health: Situating Risk in the Negotiation of Masculinity." Pp. 139–58 in *Country boys: Masculinity and rural life*, edited by H. Campbell, M. Bell, and M. Finney. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43(6):1241–99.
- D'Emilio, John. 1997. "Capitalism and Gay Identity." Pp. 239–49 in *Culture, Society & Sexuality*, edited by R. Parker and P. Aggleton. Routledge.
- Desmond, Matthew. 2006. "Becoming a Firefighter." *Ethnography* 7(4):387–421.
- Diamond, Lisa. 2009. *Sexual Fluidity: Understanding Women's Love and Desire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Diamond, Lisa M. 2003. "What Does Sexual Orientation Orient? A Biobehavioral Model Distinguishing Romantic Love and Sexual Desire." *Psychological Review* 110(1):173–192.
- Diefendorf, Sarah. 2015. "After the Wedding Night: Sexual Abstinence and Masculinities over the Life Course." *Gender & Society* 29(5):647.
- Doan, Long, Annalise Loehr, and Lisa R. Miller. 2014. "Formal Rights and Informal Privileges for Same-Sex Couples: Evidence from a National Survey Experiment." *American Sociological Review* 79(6):1172–1195.
- Duffin, Thomas P. 2016. "The Lowdown on the Down Low: Why Some Bisexually Active Men Choose to Self-Identify as Straight." *Journal of Bisexuality* 16(4):484–506.
- Economist. 2016. "A Country Divided by Counties: America's Presidential Election over Time and Space." *The Economist*, November 11.
- Emerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. 1995. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Faderman, Lillian. 1991. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Falomir-Pichastor, Juan Manuel and Gabriel Mugny. 2009. "'I'm Not Gay. . . . I'm a Real Man!': Heterosexual Men's Gender Self-Esteem and Sexual Prejudice." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 35(9):1233–1243.
- Fellows, Will. 1998. *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

- Flood, Michael. 2008. "Men, Sex, and Homosociality: How Bonds between Men Shape Their Sexual Relations with Women." *Men and Masculinities* 10(3):339–359.
- Foucault, Michel. 1988. *The History of Sexuality*. 1st Vintage books ed. New York: Vintage Books.
- Frank, David John, Bayliss J. Camp, and Steven A. Boutcher. 2010. "Worldwide Trends in the Criminal Regulation of Sex, 1945 to 2005." *American Sociological Review* 75(6):867–893.
- Frank, David John and Elizabeth H. Mceneaney. 1999. "The Individualization of Society and the Liberalization of State Policies on Same-Sex Sexual Relations, 1984–1995." *Social Forces* 77(3):911–943.
- Frederick, David A., H. Kate St John, Justin R. Garcia, and Elisabeth A. Lloyd. 2018. "Differences in Orgasm Frequency Among Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Heterosexual Men and Women in a U.S. National Sample." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 47(1):273–88.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1975. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. New York: Basic Books.
- Galinsky, Adena M., Martha K. McClintock, and Linda J. Waite. 2014. "Sexuality and Physical Contact in National Social Life, Health, and Aging Project Wave 2." *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B* 69:S83–98.
- Gansen, Heidi M. 2017. "Reproducing (and Disrupting) Heteronormativity: Gendered Sexual Socialization in Preschool Classrooms." *Sociology of Education* 90(3):255–272.
- Gattis, Maurice N., Paul Sacco, and Renee M. Cunningham-williams. 2012. "Substance Use and Mental Health Disorders Among Heterosexual Identified Men and Women Who Have Same-Sex Partners or Same-Sex Attraction: Results from the National Epidemiological Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions." *Archives of Sexual Behavior; New York* 41(5):1185–97.
- Gerber, Lynne. 2011. *Seeking the Straight and Narrow: Weight Loss and Sexual Reorientation in Evangelical America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gieryn, Thomas F. 2000. "A Space for Place in Sociology." *Annual Review of Sociology* 26(1):463–496.
- Glaser, Barney G. and Anselm L. Strauss. 1967. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing.

- Glenn, Evelyn Nakano. 2015. "Settler Colonialism as Structure: A Framework for Comparative Studies of U.S. Race and Gender Formation." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1(1):52–72.
- Golash-Boza, Tanya. 2016. "A Critical and Comprehensive Sociological Theory of Race and Racism." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 2(2):129–141.
- Gonzales, Gilbert, Julia Przedworski, and Carrie Henning-Smith. 2016. "Comparison of Health and Health Risk Factors Between Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adults and Heterosexual Adults in the United States: Results From the National Health Interview Survey." *JAMA Internal Medicine* 176(9):1344–51.
- González-López, Gloria. 2005. *Erotic Journeys: Mexican Immigrants and Their Sex Lives*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gordon, Liahna E. and Tony J. Silva. 2015. "Inhabiting the Sexual Landscape: Toward an Interpretive Theory of the Development of Sexual Orientation and Identity." *Journal of Homosexuality* 62(4):495–530.
- Gray, Mary L., Colin R. Johnson, and Brian Joseph Gilley. 2016. *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies*. New York: New York University Press.
- Green, Kelly E. and Brian A. Feinstein. 2012. "Substance Use in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Populations: An Update on Empirical Research and Implications for Treatment." *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors: Journal of the Society of Psychologists in Addictive Behaviors* 26(2):265–78.
- Grzanka, Patrick. 2016. "Queer Survey Research and the Ontological Dimensions of Heterosexism." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 44(3/4):131–149.
- Grzanka, Patrick R. and Joseph R. Miles. 2016. "The Problem with the Phrase 'Intersecting Identities': LGBT Affirmative Therapy, Intersectionality, and Neoliberalism." *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 13(4):371–389.
- Halberstam, Judith. 2005. *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. New York: New York University Press.
- Halberstam, Judith. 2011. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Hale, C. 1997. "Leatherdyke Boys and Their Daddies: How to Have Sex without Women or Men." *Social Text* (52–53):223–236.
- Hamilton, Laura and Elizabeth A. Armstrong. 2009. "Gendered Sexuality in Young Adulthood." *Gender & Society* 23(5):589–616.

- Hearn, Jeff. 1995. *Sex at Work: The Power and Paradox of Organisation Sexuality*. Rev. ed. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Hearn, Jeff, Deborah L. Sheppard, Peta Tancred-Sheriff, and Gibson Burrell, eds. 1989. *The Sexuality of Organization*. London: Sage.
- Heath, Melanie. 2009. "State of Our Unions: Marriage Promotion and the Contested Power of Heterosexuality." *Gender & Society* 23(1):27–48.
- Hennen, Peter. 2008. *Faeries, Bears, and Leathermen: Men in Community Queering the Masculine*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Herd, Gilbert H. 1987. *The Sambia: Ritual and Gender in New Guinea*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Hill Collins, Patricia. 2004. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York: Routledge.
- Hoang, Kimberly Kay. 2015. *Dealing in Desire: Asian Ascendancy, Western Decline, and the Hidden Currencies of Global Sex Work*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.
- Howard, John. 1999. *Men like That: A Southern Queer History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Humphreys, Laud. 1970. *Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places*. Chicago: Aldine PubCo.
- Irvine, Janice M. 2012. "Can't Ask, Can't Tell: How Institutional Review Boards Keep Sex In The Closet." *Contexts* 11(2):28–33.
- Irvine, Janice M. 2015. "The Other Sex Work: Stigma in Sexuality Research." *Social Currents* 2(2):116–25.
- Jackson, Stevi. 1999. *Heterosexuality in Question*. London: SAGE Publications.
- Jakubek, Joseph and Spencer D. Wood. 2018. "Emancipatory Empiricism: The Rural Sociology of W.E.B. Du Bois." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 4(1):14–34.
- Johnson, Colin R. 2013. *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Johnson, Steven D. 2012. "Gay Affirmative Psychotherapy With Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Individuals: Implications for Contemporary Psychotherapy Research." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 82(4):516–522.



- Jones, Angela. Forthcoming. "Sex Is Not a Problem: The Erasure of Pleasure in Sexual Science Research." *Sexualities*.
- Jones, Robert P. 2014. "Self-Segregation: Why It's So Hard for Whites to Understand Ferguson." *The Atlantic*, August 21.
- Katz, Jonathan. 2001. *Love Stories: Sex between Men before Homosexuality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Katz, Jonathan. 1995. *The Invention of Heterosexuality*. New York: Dutton.
- Kazyak, Emily. 2012. "Midwest or Lesbian? Gender, Rurality, and Sexuality." *Gender & Society* 26(6):825–848.
- Keiller, Scott W. 2010. "Masculine Norms as Correlates of Heterosexual Men's Attitudes Toward Gay Men and Lesbian Women." *Psychology of Men & Masculinity* 11(1):38–52.
- Kimmel, Michael and Abby Ferber. 2000. "'White Men Are This Nation': Right-Wing Militias and the Restoration of Rural American Masculinity." *Rural Sociology* 65(4):582–604.
- Kimmel, Michael S. 1996. *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*. New York: Free Press.
- Kitzinger, Celia and Sue Wilkinson. 1995. "Transitions From Heterosexuality to Lesbianism: The Discursive Production of Lesbian Identities." *Developmental Psychology* 31(1):95–104.
- Kuperberg, Arielle and Alicia M. Walker. 2018. "Heterosexual College Students Who Hookup with Same-Sex Partners." *Archives of Sexual Behavior*.
- Leap, Braden. 2017. "Survival Narratives: Constructing an Intersectional Masculinity through Stories of the Rural/Urban Divide." *Journal of Rural Studies* 55:12–21.
- Levine, Ethan Czuy, Debby Herbenick, Omar Martinez, Tsung-Chieh Fu, and Brian Dodge. 2018. "Open Relationships, Nonconsensual Nonmonogamy, and Monogamy Among U.S. Adults: Findings from the 2012 National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 1–12.
- Lichter, Daniel and David Brown. 2011. "Rural America in an Urban Society: Changing Spatial and Social Boundaries." *Annual Review of Sociology* 37:565–592.
- Lindau, Stacy Tessler et al. 2007. "A Study of Sexuality and Health among Older Adults in the United States." *The New England Journal of Medicine* 357(8):762–74.

- Lipsitz, George. 2011. *How Racism Takes Place*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Little, Jo. 2015. "The Development of Feminist Perspectives in Rural Gender Studies." Pp. 107–18 in *Feminisms and Ruralities*, edited by P. Barbara, B. Brandth, and J. Little. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Loe, Meika. 2001. "Fixing Broken Masculinity: Viagra as a Technology for the Production of Gender and Sexuality." *Sexuality and Culture* 5(3):97–125.
- Lourie, Michael A. and Belinda L. Needham. 2017. "Sexual Orientation Discordance and Young Adult Mental Health." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 46(5):943–54.
- Malani, Peter, Sarah Clark, Erica Solway, Dianne Singer, and Matthias Kirch. 2018. *National Poll on Healthy Aging Sexual Health Report*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan.
- Martin, Karin A. 2009. "Normalizing Heterosexuality: Mothers' Assumptions, Talk, and Strategies with Young Children." *American Sociological Review* 74(2):190–207.
- Mary L. Gray. 2009. *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*. New York: New York University Press.
- McCall, Leslie. 2005. "The Complexity of Intersectionality." *Signs* 30(3):1771–1800.
- Messner, Michael. 1999. "Becoming 100% Straight." Pp. 104–10 in *Inside Sports*, edited by J. Coakley and P. Donnelly. London: Routledge.
- Messner, Michael A. 1992. *Power at Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Minkowitz, Donna. 2017. "How the Alt-Right Is Using Sex and Camp to Attract Gay Men to Fascism." *Slate*, June 5.
- Morgan, Elizabeth. 2012. "Not Always a Straight Path: College Students' Narratives of Heterosexual Identity Development." *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research* 66(1–2):79–93.
- Morris, Edward W. 2008. "'Rednecks,' 'Rutters,' and 'Rithmetic: Social Class, Masculinity, and Schooling in a Rural Context." *Gender & Society* 22(6):728–51.
- Munsch, Christin L. and Kjerstin Gruys. 2018. "What Threatens, Defines: Tracing the Symbolic Boundaries of Contemporary Masculinity." *Sex Roles* 1–18.
- Myers, Kristen and Laura Raymond. 2010. "Elementary School Girls and Heteronormativity: The Girl Project." *Gender and Society* 24(2):167–188.

- Newcomb, Michael E. and Brian Mustanski. 2010. "Internalized Homophobia and Internalizing Mental Health Problems: A Meta-Analytic Review." *Clinical Psychology Review* 30(8):1019–29.
- Newcomb, Michael E. and Brian Mustanski. 2011. "Moderators of the Relationship Between Internalized Homophobia and Risky Sexual Behavior in Men Who Have Sex with Men: A Meta-Analysis." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 40(1):189–99.
- Norton, Rictor. 2006. *Mother Clap's Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England, 1700-1830*. Hornchurch, UK: Chalford Press.
- O'Connor, Emma C., Thomas E. Ford, and Noely C. Banos. 2017. "Restoring Threatened Masculinity: The Appeal of Sexist and Anti-Gay Humor." *Sex Roles* 77(9–10):567–80.
- Office of Management and Budget. 2010. "2010 Standards for Delineating Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas; Notice." *Federal Register* 75(123):37245–52.
- Omi, Michael and Howard Winant. 2015. *Racial Formation in the United States*. New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.
- Orne, Jason. 2017. *Boystown: Sex & Community in Chicago*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Pascoe, C. J. 2011. *Dude, You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*. New ed. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Pascoe, CJ and Tony Silva. Forthcoming. "Sexuality in School." in *Education & Society*, edited by T. Domina, B. Gibbs, L. Nunn, and A. Penner. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Pierce, Jason E. 2016. *Making the White Man's West: Whiteness and the Creation of the American West*. Boulder: University Press of Colorado.
- Pini, Barbara, Berit Brandth, and Jo Little. 2015. *Feminisms and Ruralities*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Prestage, Garrett et al. 2015. "Understanding Gay Community Subcultures: Implications for HIV Prevention." *AIDS and Behavior* 19(12):2224–33.
- Priebe, Gisela and Carl Göran Svedin. 2013. "Operationalization of Three Dimensions of Sexual Orientation in a National Survey of Late Adolescents." *Journal of Sex Research* 50(8):727–38.
- Pulido, Laura. 2006. *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

- Quidley-Rodriguez, Narciso and Joseph P. De Santis. 2017. "A Literature Review of Health Risks in the Bear Community, a Gay Subculture." *American Journal of Men's Health* 11(6):1673–79.
- Reynolds, Chelsea. 2015. "'I Am Super Straight and I Prefer You Be Too': A Textual Analysis of Craigslist Posts Made by 'Straight' Men Seeking Homosexual Sexual Encounters Online." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 39(3):213–231.
- Rich, Adrienne. 1980. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5(4):631–60.
- Robertson, Ronald E., Felix W. Tran, Lauren N. Lewark, and Robert Epstein. 2018. "Estimates of Non-Heterosexual Prevalence: The Roles of Anonymity and Privacy in Survey Methodology." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 47(4):1069–84.
- Robinson, Brandon and Salvador Vidal-Ortiz. 2013. "Displacing the Dominant 'Down Low' Discourse: Deviance, Same-Sex Desire, and Craigslist.Org." *Deviant Behavior* 34(3):224–41.
- Rosenberg, Gabriel. 2016. "A Classroom in the Barnyard: Reproducing Heterosexuality in Interwar American 4-H." Pp. 88–108 in *Queering the Countryside: New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies*, edited by M. Gray, C. Johnson, and B. Gilley. New York: NYU Press.
- Rotundo, E. Anthony. 1989. "Romantic Friendship: Male Intimacy and Middle-Class Youth in the Northern United States, 1800-1900." *Journal of Social History* 23(1):1–25.
- Rubin, Gayle. 2000. "Sites, Settlements, and Urban Sex: Archaeology And The Study of Gay Leathermen in San Francisco 1955–1995." Pp. 62–88 in *Archaeologies of Sexuality*, edited by R. Schmidt and B. Voss. London: Routledge.
- Rupp, Leila and Verta Taylor. 2011. "Going Back and Giving Back: The Ethics of Staying in the Field." *Qualitative Sociology* 34(3):483–496.
- Rust, Paul. 1992. "The Politics of Sexual Identity: Sexual Attraction and Behavior among Lesbian and Bisexual Women." *Social Problems* 39(4):366–386.
- Sallaz, Jeffrey and Jane Zavisca. 2007. "Bourdieu in American Sociology, 1980-2004." *Annual Review of Sociology* 33:21–41.
- Savin - Williams, Ritch C. and Zhana Vrangalova. 2013. "Mostly Heterosexual as a Distinct Sexual Orientation Group: A Systematic Review of the Empirical Evidence." *Developmental Review* 33(1):58–88.

- Savin-Williams, Ritch C. 2014. "An Exploratory Study of the Categorical versus Spectrum Nature of Sexual Orientation." *Journal of Sex Research* 51(4):446–53.
- Savin-Williams, Ritch C. 2017. *Mostly Straight: Sexual Fluidity among Men*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Schalet, Amy T. 2011. *Not under My Roof: Parents, Teens, and the Culture of Sex*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Schilt, Kristen and Laurel Westbrook. 2009. "Doing Gender, Doing Heteronormativity: 'Gender Normals,' Transgender People, and the Social Maintenance of Heterosexuality." *Gender & Society* 23(4):440–64.
- Schippers, Mimi. 2016. *Beyond Monogamy: Polyamory and the Future of Polyqueer Sexualities*. New York: New York University Press.
- Schnabel, Landon. 2018. "Sexual Orientation and Social Attitudes." *Socius* 4:1–18.
- Seidman, Steven. 2002. *Beyond the Closet: The Transformation of Gay and Lesbian Life*. New York: Routledge.
- Seto, Michael C. 2017. "The Puzzle of Male Chronophilias." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 46(1):3–22.
- Sheff, Elisabeth. 2014. *The Polyamorists next Door: Inside Multiple-Partner Relationships and Families*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Sherkat, Darren E., Melissa Powell-Williams, Gregory Maddox, and Kylan Mattias de Vries. 2011. "Religion, Politics, and Support for Same-Sex Marriage in the United States, 1988–2008." *Social Science Research* 40(1):167–180.
- Silva, Tony J. 2018. "Straight Identity and Same-Sex Desire: Conservatism, Homophobia, and Straight Culture." *Social Forces* 1-28.
- Silva, Tony. 2017. "A Quantitative Test of Critical Heterosexuality Theory: Predicting Straight Identification in a Nationally Representative Sample." *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 1–14.
- Silva, Tony J. and Rachel Bridges Whaley. 2018. "Bud-Sex, Dude-Sex, and Heteroflexible Men: The Relationship between Straight Identification and Social Attitudes in a Nationally Representative Sample of Men with Same-Sex Attractions or Sexual Practices." *Sociological Perspectives* 61(3):426–43.
- Smith-Rosenberg, Carroll. 1975. "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America." *Signs* 1(1):1–29.

- Solebello, Nicholas and Sinikka Elliott. 2011. "'We Want Them to Be as Heterosexual as Possible': Fathers Talk about Their Teen Children's Sexuality." *Gender & Society* 25(3):293–315.
- Stacey, Judith. 2004. "Cruising to Familyland: Gay Hypergamy and Rainbow Kinship." *Current Sociology* 52(2):181–197.
- Stein, Arlene and Ken Plummer. 1994. "'I Can't Even Think Straight' 'Queer' Theory and the Missing Sexual Revolution in Sociology." *Sociological Theory* 12(2):178–187.
- Szymanski, Dawn M., Susan Kashubeck - West, and Jill Meyer. 2008. "Internalized Heterosexism: Measurement, Psychosocial Correlates, and Research Directions." *Counseling Psychologist* 36(4):525–574.
- Twenge, Jean M., Ryne A. Sherman, and Brooke E. Wells. 2016. "Changes in American Adults' Reported Same-Sex Sexual Experiences and Attitudes, 1973-2014." *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 45(7):1713–30.
- United States Census Bureau. 2016. *QuickFacts: United States*. Washington, D.C.
- Vasquez, Jessica. 2015. "Disciplined Preferences: Explaining the (Re)Production of Latino Endogamy." *Social Problems* 62(3):455–475.
- Vrangalova, Zhana and Ritch C. Savin-Williams. 2014. "Psychological and Physical Health of Mostly Heterosexuals: A Systematic Review." *Journal of Sex Research* 51(4):410–45.
- Waite, Linda J., Edward O. Laumann, Aniruddha Das, and L. Philip Schumm. 2009. "Sexuality: Measures of Partnerships, Practices, Attitudes, and Problems in the National Social Life, Health, and Aging Study." *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B* 64B(suppl\_1):i56–66.
- Walker, Alicia. 2014. "'Our Little Secret': How Publicly Heterosexual Women Make Meaning From Their 'Undercover' Same-Sex Sexual Experiences." *Journal of Bisexuality* 14(2):194–208.
- Ward, Brian W., James M. Dahlhamer, Adena M. Galinsky, and Sarah S. Joestl. 2014. "Sexual Orientation and Health among US Adults: National Health Interview Survey, 2013." *Natl Health Stat Report* 77(77):1–10.
- Ward, Jane. 2008. "Dude-Sex: White Masculinities and 'Authentic' Heterosexuality Among Dudes Who Have Sex With Dudes." *Sexualities* 11(4):414–434.
- Ward, Jane. 2015. *Not Gay: Sex between Straight White Men*. New York: New York University Press.

- Warner, Michael. 1993. *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Weaver, Kevin S. and Theresa K. Vescio. 2015. "The Justification of Social Inequality in Response to Masculinity Threats." *Sex Roles* 72(11-12):521-35.
- Whitehead, Andrew L. 2010. "Sacred Rites and Civil Rights: Religion's Effect on Attitudes Toward Same-Sex Unions and the Perceived Cause of Homosexuality." *Social Science Quarterly* 91(1):63-79.
- Wienke, Chris and Gretchen J. Hill. 2013. "Does Place of Residence Matter? Rural-Urban Differences and the Wellbeing of Gay Men and Lesbians." *Journal of Homosexuality* 60(9):1256-79.
- Wilkinson, Lindsey and Jennifer Pearson. 2013. "High School Religious Context and Reports of Same-Sex Attraction and Sexual Identity in Young Adulthood." *Social Psychology Quarterly; Washington* 76(2):180-202.
- Willer, Robb, Christabel L. Rogalin, Bridget Conlon, and Michael T. Wojnowicz. 2013. "Overdoing Gender: A Test of the Masculine Overcompensation Thesis." *American Journal of Sociology* 118(4):980-1022.
- Wilson, Jim. 2017. "California's Far North Deplores 'Tyranny' of the Urban Majority." *New York Times*, July 2.