

Abstract Young gay men may both desire and fear, even dread, the act of being penetrated anally. In Norwegian culture today, these men not infrequently associate this act with a loss of dignity and manhood. Closely connected to this, the act of being anally penetrated has the power to shape or define the young man's sense of self. Young gay Norwegian men have, however, developed or adopted strategies for gaining experience and experiencing pleasure in emotionally satisfying, culturally transformative and physiologically safe ways. Hence, an examination of these strategies seems especially worthwhile. The empirical data underlying this examination were gathered through a qualitative study among young gay men in Norway (1994–1996).

Keywords anal penetration, gay, self, young

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Being Anally Penetrated: Erotic Inhibitions, Improvizations and Transformations

Introduction

The focus of this article is a range of sexual acts involving the bodily region of the anus, rectum and prostate. However, the primary focus is not the physiological acts themselves but rather the cultural and societal features that, for many young gay men, make the act of being penetrated one of conflicting desires and concerns. The qualitative research project on which this study is based was initiated as a result of discussions held between the Norwegian Gay Health Committee (hereafter NGHC) and the Norwegian National AIDS Team. The participants quickly agreed that issues pertaining to being young and gay deserve attention in their own right, quite apart from whether young gay men are at higher risk of contracting infections than other segments of the gay population. The primary topic of this article is the culturally coded and often personally conflicted experience of a young man being anally penetrated.

We subsume under sex a complex range of human phenomena, not only somatic practices but also cultural and personal signs of sexual practices and desires (i.e., immediate physical involvement and densely mediated gestures).¹ The particular societies in which young gay men live provide them with images and symbols of anal penetration. But there are, among the cultural signs and images of homosexuality available to young Norwegian gay men, hardly any that are not derived from the heterosexual domain (for a general discussion see for example Butler, 1990; de Lauretis, 1984). That is, there is not a specifically gay framework in which this mode of sexuality can be described, analysed and explored. This absence is striking to social scientists and debilitating for the young gay men. Indeed, it contributes significantly to the difficulties experienced by some gay men regarding anal penetration. But another factor contributing to the difficulties and conflicts experienced by some gay men in this context is how the act of 'being penetrated' tends to be interpreted by these men. Even if merely enacted in fantasy, the act is taken as evidence about *who* the young man *is* (he *is* a person who desires to be penetrated).

The following discussion is, excluding a brief conclusion, divided into four parts of unequal length. First, the means by which data were originally gathered and eventually articulated will be briefly indicated. In particular, I will convey a sense of who these young men are and how their stories were collected; but also an explanation of my terminology (especially the terms used to signify anal penetration and the meaning to be attached to self). Second, an exemplary case will be presented. Third, the self-narrated experiences of young gay Norwegian men will be examined in reference to four strategies adopted by them in order to meet the challenges and difficulties associated with 'being penetrated'. The four strategies are neither exhaustive nor exclusive. They are (a) the *doing of the act*; (b) the *careful selection of partners*; (c) the *careful choice of position during intercourse*; and (d) the *reframing of the act as 'natural'*. I have chosen these strategies as a way of framing this part of the discussion because it is principally by their means that these young men are either resolving their conflicts or learning to live creatively with antagonistic impulses and images. These strategies provide viable and safe ways to gain experience and to experience pleasure. For those young men who struggle with desire and fear regarding anal penetration, much is likely to change with time. Finally, I will examine the manner in which being penetrated, or even the mere fantasy of it, can threaten a young man's sense of self.

Method

In the study a qualitative method is adopted. Data for analysis have been gathered through a combination of techniques – the principal of these

techniques being repeated interviews with 20 young men over a period of 12 to 24 months during which 82 interviews were conducted. None of the participants dropped out of the project. After the conclusion of the period of formal interviewing, several of the young men have kept in contact. When material from these conversations is used, this is of course done with the explicit consent of the young men. Except for two men who were recruited by the researcher through snowballing, the young men were all recruited by NGHC through employees and volunteers of the Committee who conducted HIV-preventive work in bars, or through other networks of the NGHC. The sample was limited to young self-identified gay men who had already had sex with at least one man, though the age of the partner varied wildly.² When the project started the participants were between 17 and 22 years of age (mean age 19.5 years). The sample included young men who regularly visited gay bars as well as ones who rarely or never frequented such scenes. In both these groups, young men were included who did and did not participate in organizations for gay men. The interviews were carried out in three Norwegian towns: Oslo, the capital, situated in the southeast; Trondheim in central Norway; and Bodø in the northern part of the country.³ Data from the interviews were complemented by seven focus group discussions as well as by key informant interviews and dialogues. Altogether 57 men (other than those who have been interviewed) have participated in the focus group discussions. Except for one focus group discussion, the data-gathering has been undertaken by the author herself.⁴

Choice of words and concepts

The choice of words used to signify different dimensions of anal intercourse posed thorny problems. Careful consideration was demanded and explicit clarifications often required. For example, 'fucking' and 'penetration' were often used synonymously (to fuck being correlated with penetrating another, to be fucked being correlated with being penetrated by another). But, even if these terms were often taken as equivalent, they can also be used to reverse established correlations and associations. For example, we may ask: Is the man being penetrated by another, or does he envelope his partner? Who 'fucks' whom? Is it possible that fucking be reciprocal, such that agency and passivity are not dissociated into two exclusive roles? Since the interpretation of the different positions during an encounter involving anal penetration is often vital to many young men, the signs used to convey or mediate the experiences corresponding to these positions will be of great importance. The concept of 'having anal intercourse' was also not uniformly understood. While most of the young men understood this concept to say or imply nothing about who penetrated whom, some of them did take the term to be restricted to the act

of being penetrated (to have anal intercourse being synonymous with being penetrated). Hence, when asked if they had had anal intercourse, they answered 'no' even if they had penetrated their partner(s).

The distinction between 'receptive' and 'insertive' practices was also not free from ambiguity. In contexts related to HIV, these terms are frequently used to designate different modes in intercourse. This distinction clearly makes sense when there is a need to differentiate between a person who receives the semen of another and one who inserts himself in another. But if 'receptive' is understood to indicate the reception of something other than semen, its meaning is less straightforward and even less intelligible. For example, take the case of a young man who has previously closed off his body due to a controlling fear of pain; when he gives or opens himself to his partner, is the young man the only one who is 'receptive'? Whether or not the young man receives the other's semen, his partner will, when given access to the young man's body, receive trust. Thus, the partner is *both* insertive and receptive.

The quotations from the young men are translated as directly as possible. Some preliminary clarifications are needed. The Norwegian word 'knulle' is generally equivalent to the English 'fuck', but it is not used as a general term of abuse. In Norwegian, 'å ta' (to take) is also used to denote intercourse. When used in the context of intercourse between men, the term 'å bli tatt' (to be taken) represents a man who is being penetrated and is also 'passive', or at least not the leading partner, during anal intercourse. 'å ta' (to take) on the other hand, signifies the act of the man who penetrates. In addition, 'ta' (take) stands (like its English counterpart) for a variety of other experiences such as 'take care of', 'take regardless of one's own will', 'steal', 'taken as I am', 'taken with force', 'take away', 'take over' and 'taken by'. When experiences involving anal intercourse were being recalled, the young men often deliberately intended a multiplicity of meanings. When I asked them about their experience of anal intercourse, they would frequently stress that by 'taken' they meant the experience of 'being taken in every sense of the word' or 'in its full meaning'. In the quotations below, 'fuck' is used as a translation for both 'å knulle' and 'å ta' but when 'fuck' is used to translate 'take', the relevant form of 'take' will be inserted in brackets.

The act of being penetrated may be experienced as indicative or even constitutive of who the young man is. To act in this way, or to allow oneself to be taken in this manner, can be felt to be self-disclosive (the self is revealing himself to be one who . . .) or self-constitutive (the self is by such acts or receptivity actually making himself into one who . . .). The relationship of the self to itself is always mediated, to some extent, by culturally coded signs, so that the self cannot free itself from the constrictive or denigrating power of culturally sanctioned signs without freeing itself from aspects

of itself (Foucault, 1986). The self must work on, and experiment with, itself, that s/he might twist free from the normalizing effects of its specific enculturation.

While *self* is a commonplace term, *subject* is not (at least not in the sense in which it is conventionally used in such disciplines or discourses as anthropology, semiotics, etc.). In this article, I will use the term *self* to designate what ordinary persons in their everyday circumstances tend to mean by this term; but, in addition, I intend this term to carry some of the most salient insights embodied in *subject*, when it is used as a term of art in such disciplines as anthropology, sociology, and philosophy. Part of the rationale for this is that *self* in its everyday usage does overlap with some of the meanings conveyed by *subject*. But the deliberate conjunction here of self and subjectivity is justified not only because it helps to highlight just how subtle and nuanced is our workaday conception of *self* but also because the theoretical conception of *subject* assists in bringing into focus some of the most important features of anal penetration.

So, for these purposes, the self is the subject and, in turn, the subject is the human organism insofar as it has undergone the radical transformations due to enculturation. As a result of being subject to these processes, the organism is transformed into a subject, the most salient features of subjectivity being its (i) self-division (the self is more than its conscious agency, being also an unconscious being); (ii) reflexivity (capacity to refer to itself, to become aware of itself, etc.); and (iii) performativity (its capacity to assume and discard roles within the improvisational dramas of everyday life). Of course, one might define *subjectivity* differently; but the definition being proposed here both accords with the understanding of important contemporary theorists (e.g., Colapietro, 1989; Silverman, 1983, 1992) and hardly deviates at all from what self can readily be made to convey. When the young men with whom I spoke talked about themselves, they of course most readily used the first-person singular pronoun – ‘I am troubled by’ or ‘I experience intense pleasure by . . .’. The self is, however, a term linked to the reflexive use of this pronoun – I felt myself becoming depressed or I interpreted myself to be engaged in a destructive relationship or I had to admit to myself (Kenny, 1989). At times, when the young men spoke about themselves, they would use the term *self*, never *subject* or any of its cognates (*subjectivity*, etc.). How ‘I am’ or how ‘I am as a person’, however, was often used by the young men. Their use of these words clearly conveyed a sophisticated and nuanced, though implicit and untheorized, understanding of the self as a self-interpreting and self-narrating agent.

Being penetrated: desired and feared – a discussion

Throughout the research, more than half of the young men repeatedly expressed doubts, anxieties, fears and conflicts relating to being anally penetrated. Their feelings and attitudes about this topic were reinforced, first, through the discussions amongst gay men in focus groups and, later, by the responses from men who participated in meetings where analysis from the project has been presented. In fact, I was led to single out the topic 'being penetrated' as worthy of analysis on the basis of the concerns expressed by the young men in these distinct contexts. But this focus should not be interpreted as supporting the prevalent assumption that anal penetration is always an integral component of gay sexuality or homosexual practice. Indeed, some of the young men who participated in this study assumed just this when they first became homosexually active (Middelthon, 1997). Davies et al. (1992) discuss the phenomenon that 'men who are new to sex with men, tend to assume that anal intercourse is the staple of sex' (p. 270). This is somewhat understandable since their notions of sex are derived initially from prevailing conceptions about heterosexual practice, especially the notion that genital intercourse is *the* paradigmatic sexual act. The assumption that anal sex is a 'required' or necessary part of 'truly gay sex' is also reported by Arnes et al. (1995: 64). But even if anal intercourse is not necessarily in the sexual repertoire of all men who have sex with men, such intercourse is nonetheless an important practice for many gay men (e.g. Davies et al., 1993: 122). In a study conducted in eight European countries, Bochow et al. (1994) found that 'three-quarters of Danes, Germans, Austrians, Swiss and Britons practice insertive or receptive anal intercourse or both' (p. 541). Dowsett (1996) emphasizes the 'crystallizing force on male homosexual desire' of anal sex and its centrality to the social definition of male homosexuality (p. 37). Moreover, anal sex is, for young gay Norwegian men, often vitally important. This is true for those young gay men who envision anal sex in light of their own desires, fears and practices as well as for those whose main concern is the way such sex is represented by society at large.

The case of Hans

I have chosen an individual, whom I will call Hans, to represent the group of young men for whom being penetrated was an act of conflicting emotions and concerns. For Hans, the act of being penetrated was of pivotal importance and concern throughout the entire research period. But his concerns were not associated with any fear of HIV infection. Rather, Hans had always consistently used condoms and felt protected. Most of the

other young men who also felt shame and contempt in connection with being penetrated, however, found the task of protecting themselves or their partner(s) to be a difficult one (see for example Middelthoen, 1997). Hans was concerned because he felt he had only limited muscular control over his anal sphincter. In contrast to the other young men who also experienced this as a problem, Hans did not attribute his lack of control to any fear of infection. Others, however, would partly (but always only partly) attribute their 'involuntary' closure of this muscle to an unconscious protective bodily reaction prompted by the danger of HIV transmission. A good reason for choosing the experiences of Hans to represent those for whom the act of being penetrated was accompanied by doubts and conflicts is precisely his lack of fear of becoming infected. Such an absence allows for a focus on some of the cultural and societal dimensions not directly associated with HIV, but immediately relevant to the difficulties faced by this group of young men.

When we first met, Hans was 20 years old. He explained his preference to be the 'active' partner in anal intercourse by disclosing that:

I don't like to be fucked. I think it hurts – it may sound awkward, but it is about dignity. Your dignity is lost when you lay there with your ass up in the air. . . . On three occasions, I have been passive – I didn't like it.

In our second meeting, Hans admitted that he wanted to be passive and penetrated:

I want to, but I do not manage. I think it is a masculine barrier. I feel that I will have lost if I do it. [So] I don't manage to go through with it. It is still a question of dignity. I think it's painful and [therefore] I block myself. [But] I want to manage it. . . . Manage to relax. Maybe admit to myself that I like to be fucked [taken]. Active-passive is the problem I encounter in myself. I am beginning to feel a deep attraction towards masculine men.

When we met for the third time, Hans had visited a sauna and had sex with a man who had penetrated him, or rather, on whom Hans had penetrated himself:

It took half an hour but felt like a year – afterwards I took a shower and went home. I felt like calling my friends and telling them that 'now I have done it' – it is probably like the way girls feel it But I am not ready yet – it is still me who dominates, who is the active one.

This claim prompted me to ask, in what sense had he been the active one? Hans explained that: 'I laid him on his back and sat myself on him. It was painful – I got no pleasure out of it With me it takes a long time, I think I will do more of it'.

For Hans, contempt or loss of dignity is not only a matter of concern to himself, but also a matter concerning all men who allow themselves to

be penetrated. He acknowledged that, after having penetrated a man, feelings of contempt for his partner emerged:

I want to have nothing to do with them afterwards. Now I feel contempt for those whom I have fucked. If you [directed at the interviewer] had put on a dildo belt and fucked a man – how would you regard him afterwards? Like pudding – I have something about whether I will ever manage to get rid of this thing that I lose face and manhood if I am fucked. Now I don't even manage it the other way around. I don't manage to fuck them and see them as real men afterwards.

In our fourth encounter, one and a half years after we first met, Hans felt he had made a breakthrough. In order to get control over the muscle which kept on 'locking itself', he had bought a dildo and practised with it. In addition, he had established a stable relationship with a man twice his age by whom he was anally penetrated:

Even if being fucked [taken] is what I liked the most, my body did not function. I went out and bought a single dildo – afterwards things have functioned well – [since] I learnt to relax. The important thing for me is to be fucked [taken]. If I am to get psychological satisfaction, it is important for me to be dominated.

When I asked about what made this sexual practice different from other kinds of sex, he answered:

It is more intense, when it is real anal sex I would have liked to see it on film – my tears are running – suddenly it is as if I understand fist fucking. If you have such a big thing in you [shows his fist and underarm] – then it is he who determines – it is as if you are hooked on him. It is as if you are hooked up on a hook, mentally. [I feel] an explosion in my head. What I like is that the other takes full control. That thing about explosion is something new to me.

By the time of the last of the scheduled interviews, Hans' relationship to his lover had come to an end. At that time he did not participate in sex involving him being penetrated. Though he still desired to be taken in this way, he had not allowed himself to be in order to protect himself from feelings of humiliation. He said that he would not resume the practice until he was again in a safe and stable relationship. Asked whether he still despised those whom he penetrates, he replied: 'There is still a dash of it, but it is not so significant [as before]. It is more that I do not let anybody fuck [take] me'.

Four strategies

Practising of the act

Let me turn from this representative case to four strategies for dealing with the nexus of emotions and attitudes often associated with the act of one

man being penetrated or taken by another. The first strategy to be discussed is simply practising the act of being penetrated. When I asked Aril what makes anal sex different from other kinds of sexual practices, he answered that: 'It gives me a feeling of being desired and treasured'. When we discussed this further, I asked if anal intercourse became, for him, the ultimate expression of desire:

In many ways it does. Not in the sense that I give the finest I have got. It is more that you enter the room of desire, you feel that you are passionate and [also] that the other is passionate, because of a desire which is directed towards your body and because of a desire to be taken. [Aril underlined that this was about being taken in the full range of the meanings of the concept.] It has something to do with being conquered, at least when you are passive. It has something to do with crude passion. It has something to do with a former feeling of shame. You get an incredible yearning for that passion – flowing from both yourself and the other [and enabling you] to feel that you are not the only one [who experiences such passions and even such shame].

Aril's passionate yearnings go beyond experiencing sexual pleasure. Inherent in these yearnings is a desire and passion for what is felt to be shameful; the shameful act becomes, partly because of its shamefulness, a desired act. This inversion appears to help repair some of that which has been damaged. An additional reason why Aril yearns for this kind of desire and passion is because to experience these emotions reduces his feelings of alienation and being different. It seems as if practising what has been condemned may restore some of the harm inflicted by the existing cultural notions about, and images of, this particular act. Jan expresses something similar. When asked how he experienced penetrative sex as compared to other sexual practices, he answered that he had felt anal sex to be dirty, but also that this feeling could be deleted if the sex was good: 'It is a long time since last time, but then I did not feel like a shit because it was so good'.

Many young gay men have, at some point, internalized and embodied cultural contempt and rejection. It may be claimed that in the battle to redefine and counteract these incarnations of culture the young men fight on, and with, their bodies and/or the bodies of their partners. One outcome of a successful battle may be that the act of anal penetration no longer functions as a sign of shame and desire, but as a sign of desire and pleasure.

Selecting partner(s) carefully

The second strategy is linked to the choice of partner(s). We have seen that Hans, because of his fear of humiliation and loss of manhood, was careful in his selection of partners. While some of those who carried fear of emotional and / or physical pain planned not to have intercourse before

they had found someone who would 'be careful enough', others viewed intercourse as an act they would perform with 'the right one only' or with 'the man in my life only'. Even if these images often changed as time passed, it is nevertheless significant that by categorizing penetration as an act of uttermost exclusivity the experienced conflict between fear and desire could, temporarily, be bracketed. Kristoffer also underlined the need to know and trust one's partner in order to be able to relax and enjoy the sexual encounter (see Middelthun, 2001 for a discussion of the relation between control and the possibility to surrender):

With a stranger – then it is unsafe because you may easily lose control. To be able to lose control is a value in itself – but in order to let go the control, you need first to have had it. What I particularly like with anal sex is: here comes a big adult man and takes you in all the meanings of that word, but in order to enjoy it I need the security of having this kind of control.

To learn that he himself could control the access to his body was fundamental for Gerhard. Before he acquired a feeling of such control, the sole presence of a partner's finger in the bodily realm of anus and its vicinities led to an abrupt termination of his feelings of sexual desire and urge:

Before, I would lose all desire and urge if they were approaching with as much as a finger – now, I have learnt that it is all up to me and then it is all right [if someone gets close with a finger].

Except for a few who never felt any pain, or fear of pain, when they were being penetrated for the first time, most of the young men felt that their anal sphincter was (as it physiologically also is) autonomous. At times, the muscle was described and referred to as if it was an independent actor operating on its own. When the muscle did not open, or if it closed, it was felt to be provocative, as well as protective. Like it did for Jakob who felt the closing off of the muscle as a way of unconscious self-protection:

It is like this, if I don't relax completely then never in the world would anybody get in. I tried, unconsciously, not to let them in. Of course it is grotesquely painful, if someone nevertheless forces themselves in.

One strategy to gain control over the independent muscle for those who wanted to open up was exercising with a dildo. But above all, the efforts to gain control of the muscle was felt to depend upon the relationship between the partners, upon whether the young man felt he could trust his partner to be careful and respectful enough.

In our fourth meeting, Birger and I discussed two issues that had also been subject to our exploration in previous meetings and which also made the choice of partner a pivotal concern for him. The first was the issue of why he often did not use a condom when he penetrated a man in anal intercourse and the second was why he did not allow himself to be

penetrated when he so desired. Regarding the former, Birger said he intensely feared that by putting on a condom and thereby interrupting the flow of the encounter, he would lose his erection. A loss which for him induced humiliation. Why he had never allowed a partner to penetrate him, he perceived as a direct result of his fear that his partner would get faeces on his penis:

They will think I am shit. That is the reason [faeces]. It is not the pain I am afraid of. Others says that it will demand practice – I would do it with someone I really trusted – then you would feel safe/secure that he would not think that this is bad – because then that person will already know who I am [before the exposure to faeces].

The sexual encounter that Birger feared was one that carried the slightest possibility for faeces to be involved. The hazard lay embedded in the possibility that this material could be read as a sign of his *self* – a sign, a metaphor, of how he ‘was’. To avoid this devastating experience, Birger’s plan was only to let a man who, beforehand, ‘*knew who I am*’ penetrate him. In such a case, his partner would then already have ‘seen him’, and established an image of him which traces of faeces could not jeopardize. I would like to mention that when Birger and I met again three years after our first meeting (i.e. after the formal period of interviewing), it was as if these fears of his had melted away. No longer did he feel that his feeling of self or his partner’s perception of him as a person was at stake if he was penetrated (or should lose his erection). Before Birger overcame these fears he only seldom protected his partner or himself against HIV (for further discussion see Middelthun and Aggleton, 2001).

Finally, as fear of faeces has been used as an example, it should be noted that the possibility for exposure to faeces during a sexual encounter was experienced very differently by the young men. For some this never constituted any problem. Others would think no more about this matter as soon as they had taken precautions and felt themselves to be clean. For those young men, however, who carried fears like Birger did, the issue of exposing the partner to faeces was perceived as a great hindrance to a satisfying practice of their desires.

Carefully choosing the positions during intercourse

The third strategy for coping with emotions arising from anal penetration is linked to positions chosen during penetration. Physical positions during intercourse are of course important for the experience of pleasure. But as we have seen, certain positions may also involve feelings of humiliation. However, just as some positions may carry danger of humiliation, others may provide protection against it. Before proceeding, I would like to stress that this focus on positions does not provide any support to the notion

that homosexual men take up fixed roles in sexual encounters. The idea of role separation gains no support from the SIGMA project in England and Wales whose results 'strongly contradicts the idea that homosexual men tend to be exclusively active or passive during anal intercourse' (Coxon et al., 1993: 881; see also Weatherburn et al., 1992). Nor does Australian data support such an idea (Kippax et al., 1993). Neither is there any indication that Norwegian gay men perceive active or passive, penetrating or penetrated as mutually exclusive practices or positions. After having gained some sexual experience with other men, young Norwegian gay men including those who think of themselves as primarily, though not exclusively, passive or active, treasure the lack of fixed procedures or roles, and the possibility to enjoy the whole spectrum from total passivity to full domination.

Regarding positions, a continuum exists ranging from a feeling that to 'be taken from behind' is degrading – 'yak – from behind is a bit dogish, sort of' – to a feeling that the face-to-face position is 'a bit comic'. Many, in fact a majority of those encountered during the interviews, held face-to-face as their preferred position during intercourse. This does not imply that intercourse from behind is not also enjoyed and desired. The reasons conveyed for why they preferred a face-to-face position were because they wanted 'to see the face and the eyes' and wanted the kind of communication this position provided because this position was either felt 'as more personal', or because it provided a stronger sense of being in control. For Jakop, to have a feeling of control was essential. Early in his sexual life he had been penetrated without consent and without a condom being used during some of these instances. For him, these experiences involved feelings of humiliation, fear and powerlessness (Middelthon, 2001). When talking with Jakop four years after we first met (i.e. after the formal closure of the project), he said he now prefers to be penetrated but that it has to be in a position that provides control:

If I lay on my back I have control – I can see his face and have my legs around his neck – and that is a vulnerable point – then it is no problem to fling him off. He may believe he has control – but you are not submissive even if you are fucked [taken] – you don't have to be submissive even if they think that that is what you are – there is a need to respect your partner – if not, the relation becomes one of disrespect. In order to feel equal I need to have just as much control as my partner. You need to have control in order to enjoy.

Contrary to the first period of his sexual life, Jakop no longer found it problematic to initiate or use condoms. He said that as he practised safer sex consistently his demand for control was no longer connected to a fear of HIV infection. His main concern was to 'feel equal' and not be perceived by his partner as 'submissive'. In one focus group, a participant said

he very much wanted to be 'taken' but felt he would be humiliated if he let anybody do this:

If I am to do it – it is terribly humiliating – then I would have to have a possibility to fuck [take] him afterwards – one example of this [he gives the interviewer a glance of apology], is that if I did not do so I would feel like a cunt [futte] afterwards – if I had fucked [taken] him too – that would have had restored or repaired the humiliation.

This young man had not yet had anal intercourse, and things may very well work out better than he anticipated. But as it was, he wanted to be penetrated from behind, but feared that this position would be humiliating. He made this clear by referring not only to how this would make him almost become a woman but how it would make him feel like a vagina – a body part to which he referred by the most abusive term available in Norwegian. This he did, not in order to offend me, but to make sure I got his point. In his image, the humiliation inflicted by this act could only be deleted if he took his partner likewise afterwards. Hocquenghem (1978) discusses this dilemma when he points out that to be penetrated 'creates the risk of a loss of identity' for a man as '[s]een from behind we are all women' (p. 87).

For others, to be dominated and surrender to that feeling was not felt to be threatening but was exactly what was desired, whether the young man was taken from behind or in a face-to-face position. Per had been penetrated a few times only (something he regretted):

Anal intercourse is a bit sacred to me. It has happened another time since last we talked. [When asked whether it was a good experience:] Yes, a different experience, much more sexual, more exiting, I got more of an erection, became overexcited, it was painful but also very pleasurable. It didn't matter that it was painful. But you feel humiliated because you don't have any control – but I actually liked losing control. I have figured out lately that I want to be passive – now I feel I have to do both.

Using the legitimizing power of biology

The final strategy which will be discussed only briefly here is the manner in which the young men employ biology and 'nature' as a way of 'de-shaming' the act of anal penetration. In the last of our scheduled meetings, I asked Lars how it had been to participate in the project. Among the issues he brought up as having been of importance to him, was the issue of learning about the prostate gland: 'That you said things like that with the prostate gland, then it became more sexual what we do; not only the thing that our opening is an ass hole, ass fucker and the like'.

Throughout the project, issues associated with the prostate gland came

up in the dialogues between the participants and me. Sometimes, the gland was brought up as part of a discussion about the need to, or advantage of, having knowledge about one's body. Just as often, however, the issue of the prostate gland was brought up and framed as a justifying argument for the young man's desire to take part in anal intercourse. Several young men did not know about the existence of the gland and its functions. The joy and relief expressed at the provision of such information were striking at times. The force of this information seemed to lie in the legitimizing and explanatory power brought about by biology's allusion to nature rather than in the prospect of intensified pleasure. Pleasure and desire in connection with anal intercourse became 'naturalized'. To discuss the inherent power of biology to make natural lies outside the scope of this article (see for a general discussion Franklin, 1997; Strathern, 1992). Important for this discussion is the apparent need of, or demand for, a naturalization of a sexual desire and practice. Frequently, the young men drew attention to the fact that anal intercourse is also on the repertoire of sex between men and women. At times this fact was conveyed with what may be described as a touch of triumph, expressing something like; 'it is not only us who do it'. Again, of interest is the need to justify or legitimize the act, and the manner in which juxtaposing hetero- and homosexual practice may function as one such legitimizing reference.

Defining the self by the act of being penetrated

The fourth part of this article is devoted to a discussion of a phenomenon we already have encountered: the manner in which the practicing of, desiring for, and / or fantasizing about, the act of being penetrated may be interpreted as acts which give evidence about the young man's self. It should be noted that among young gay men sexual practices such as mutual masturbation, or oral sex, does not seem to inherit the power to signify the self. The strategies discussed above have to a large extent been developed in order to arrest such interpretations, and / or to reduce or repair harm inflicted by these kinds of signification. As we have seen, the signs through which the young men understand and interpret are basically representations of a stereotypical heterosexual encounter of which the homosexual encounter is allegedly nothing but a variation. It was critical that Hans felt he would lose his dignity by taking what he perceived as the position of a woman.⁵ This did not imply that he himself held any corresponding idea that women lose dignity if they are penetrated. What worried Hans was that by taking what he perceived to be the position of a woman his 'dignity is lost' and 'that I lose face and manhood if I am fucked', an interpretation he also considered valid for men penetrated by him. Hans interpreted a man who was penetrated during anal intercourse

as one who was taking the position of a woman, and, consequently, by taking the position of a woman a man was no longer a man. For Hans to make himself subject to this kind of interpretation would make him feel that he had 'lost'. When he interpreted the act of being penetrated along this sequence of inferences, this particular desire and practice became an eraser of himself as a man. Bersani (1988) discusses how the 'heterosexual association of anal sex with a self-annihilation . . . ' (p. 222) is an image incorporated by gay men. In Hans such an image was still very much alive. He had not yet developed, or adopted, a sign of penetrative sexual intercourse between men which conveyed or mediated this encounter as one of (at least potential) equality and respect, and which also included men who would have a desire to make themselves subject to domination and/or humiliation in this particular sexual context.

Ironically, it may even seem as if a high degree of critical consciousness about gender roles and stereotypical images can make this matter even more complicated. For Kristoffer it was like that:

With him [his last partner] I liked best to be passive. But it is not only good to be passive – I think of the heterosexual girl who is inferior and is being fucked [taken]. It is not good for the self-esteem – feeling of self worth. With him, I felt safe – but I don't know if I want to be fucked by a stranger – I have to feel safe – I think I have it this way because I transfer from man/women – to be surrendered to someone else.

Like Hans, Kristoffer did not himself hold the idea that women are inferior, but he knew that this habit of interpretation is still prevalent in contemporary Norway. And, he assumed that by taking the position of a woman during intercourse, he would be subject to such an interpretation. Even if the young men did not, in general, carry stereotypical notions about male/female gender roles, when they interpreted their own and their partner's sexual practice in the context of anal penetration among men, such stereotypes were nevertheless very much at play.

Sennett (1982) discusses with Foucault 'why sexuality has become so important to people as a definition of themselves', as well as the historical basis for sexuality as 'the means by which people seek to be conscious of themselves' (p. 3). We have seen above that for Hans, his fantasies or sexual images as well as the very thought of practicing them threatened his feeling of self. Hans is amongst those who have kept in contact after the formal period of interviewing. He came by while I was working on this article. The reason he wanted to come he said, was because he was still frightened by his sexual fantasies and could not 'take the chance to talk to anybody else about them'. The urgent issue was not the sexual images in themselves. What frightened Hans was associated with his perception of these fantasies as something which would reveal evidence about him, about how he 'is':

I don't want to be humiliated, but at the same time my sexuality tells me that that is what I want. I do want to have a good job and success and at the same time be fucked [taken], have a man's fist in me, and even be pissed on.

He treated his fantasies (and assumed 'society' did likewise) as signs representing him as a person, signs overruling other signs that mediated other aspects or traits of him and his life. Not only were his fears evoked by the thought of practicing his desires but just as much by the mere experience of having had these fantasies. Hans said that for him to let matters associated with humiliation become part of his sexual life became frightening as by doing so he would nullify all other aspects of his life and personality. No space was left for such desires, where they could be desires in their own right whether they were enacted in fantasy and / or practice. Sennett closes his and Foucault's discussion about the manner in which our desires become constitutive for our self-knowledge this way:

It is difficult, if not impossible, to deduce from private sexual desires a person's capacity for loyalty, courage, or truthfulness with others. That these thoughts, these desires, these fantasies should be seen as privileged, as of importance in defining the whole of an individual personality, is what creates such a mystery about individual difference. The privilege accorded to desire is a Christian heritage. We are today far from being able to cope with what we have inherited. (1982: 21)

This is very much the way things have been for a number of the young gay men. While many found ways of coming to terms with their doubts or solving their conflicts, Hans was yet not coping in a manner satisfactory to himself. In his process of defining himself, he still gave his sexual fantasies the privileged position. (See also Plummer, 1975: 141–7 for a discussion of the power of sexuality to signify the self.)

Some young men enjoyed anal intercourse and to be 'taken' as soon as they tried this practice. For most of the men encountered in this project, however, their capacity to fully enjoy anal intercourse was a capacity learned through a process that could be painful and last for years. Crucial for these young men was their feeling that it was nothing less than their self who was at stake. As the feeling of self is intersubjectively acquired, how the young men are seen, or how they perceive themselves to be seen by others and by society as a generalized entity, is acute. When a forceful conclusion about the self can be drawn upon the basis of one particular sexual desire, something about the force of this specific desire in society is disclosed. As members of a given society, they inescapably perceive sexual acts and fantasies partly in accord with some of the dominant evaluations and biases of their particular society, even when this carries self-denigrating implications. Aril phrased the bitter experience of not only having internalized negative perceptions of homosexual practice but also having

turned these signs against other gay men and thereby, in a generalized manner, against himself:

If you are a young boy of 16 years, you certainly are very vulnerable – then anal intercourse is the most frightening part – that which you yourself have ridiculed: gay men fuck each other in the ass.

Conclusion

The translation of the framework for male–female encounters to male–male encounters has been striking throughout the project. Young gay men’s struggle to redefine, resist or surpass negative images or signs is part of an indispensable effort to move toward a specifically gay sensibility, rhetoric and conceptuality (the three being of a piece). The four strategies treated above are neither exhaustive nor exclusive. Moreover, each one exemplifies of course the relational character of sexual encounters, but also the historically and culturally mediated character of such encounters.

As there is no ‘I’ apart from some ‘we’ and as there is no human recognizable self apart from the capacity to address itself in various ways (i.e., apart from performative reflexivity), the young man’s encounters with other gay men and gay communities offer decisive opportunities for him to develop a specifically gay practice. From such encounters he can gain experience about anal penetration as both a physical act and a complex, symbolic interaction inviting interpretation. For the young man struggling with conflicting desires and arresting doubts about being anally penetrated, there is inherent in the practice itself tremendous potential for development, insight and self-transformation. The way the different meanings of the act are continually being re-interpreted and circulated within gay relationships and, more broadly, gay communities will be a truly *vital* resource for a young man who is in the process of working through his conflicts and his doubts. One common aim of the distinct strategies presented above has been to twist free from destructive and merely inhibiting consequences of existing cultural signs and images about anal penetration. The voices of the young gay Norwegian men quoted above are ones that are forcefully, often eloquently, testifying to the difficulties, possibilities, and above all exhilaration of simultaneously transforming cultural meanings and self-understanding. They also testify to the absolutely crucial importance of somatic experimentation for enhancing experience and pleasure as well as for transforming signs and selves.

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Notes

1. Various acts convey more or less determinate, though contextually and even individually variable, meaning(s) to those who have engaged in such acts or simply feel the desire to engage in these acts. This alone makes it clear that there is a semiotic as well as hermeneutic dimension to the mode of sexuality being investigated here. Insofar as acts, events and objects convey meaning, they of course function as signs, even in those instances when they are not consciously intended or instituted to function in this way. Insofar as they do function as signs, the phenomena are semiotic in character. As such, they either call or, at least, allow for interpretation, including self-conscious and self-critical processes of making sense out of what a gesture, action, caress, etc. means. When these signs are considered with reference to processes of interpretation, especially ones self-consciously undertaken and self-critically monitored, the phenomena being investigated are hermeneutic in character. An awareness of these dimensions or aspects of the phenomena being examined here informs and, to an extent, even animates this examination. In other words, this is a self-consciously semiotic and hermeneutic inquiry, though it is only implicitly such. The specific research tradition in which it is situated includes the formally semiotic anthropology of Milton Singer (1984) and the interpretative anthropology of Clifford Geertz (1973, 1983), but also the work of Charles S. Peirce (especially as interpreted and adumbrated by David Savan [1987–88] and Vincent Colapietro [1989]).
2. In order to achieve identification, description and analysis of a broad range of phenomena, as well as identification of common patterns that might cut across the variations, the sampling strategies have been non-probabilistic and purposive. (e.g. Bernard, 1994; Kuzel, 1992; Patton, 1990).
3. The population of these towns are respectively Oslo 500,000; Trondheim 147,000 and Bodø 40,000.
4. Jo Kittelsen conducted one focus group and co-conducted two additional groups.
5. To link up to feminist analysis of heterosexual receptivity and power would of course have been appropriate here. However, as space is limited, the choice was made to concentrate on the specific experiences of the young men.

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