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“After all I’ve got the soul of a young girl”– A Psychosocial Perspective on the Impact of Heteronormative Images of Masculinity on Sexual Risk Behavior of Gay Men

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“After all I’ve got the soul of a young girl“ – A Psychosocial Perspective on the Impact of Heteronormative Images of Masculinity on Sexual Risk Behavior of Gay Men

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Abstract

The paper is aimed at contributing to an empirically grounded understanding of the psychosocial dynamics that underlie the relation between heteronormative images of masculinity, internalized heterosexism and health behavior of gay men in the global North. It is based on a qualitative interview study that focuses on the consequences of the internalization of dominant images of masculinity for the identity constructions of gay men and their HIV-related sexual risk behavior in Germany. In the paper it will be argued that 1) the tension between the authoritative image of masculinity that is determined by heteronormative discourses on the one hand and the gendered self-image that is shaped and threatened by connotations of a non-masculine homosexuality on the other constitutes a decisive issue of gay identity constructions, 2) a higher sexual risk behavior can be understood as a possible consequence of the internalization of masculine images and its impact on the self-esteem, if the self-image does not match the male ideal, and 3) this may include a paradoxical desire for the imagined masculinity that is experienced as violent with regard to one’s own psychodynamics. Finally, perspectives on gay masculinities that may transgress dominant heteronormative modes of subjectification are discussed.

Keywords: masculinity, heteronormativity, internalized heterosexism, HIV/Aids, Psychosocial Studies

"Después de todo tengo el alma de una joven" - Una Perspectiva Psicosocial sobre el Impacto de las Imágenes heteronormativas de la masculinidad en las Conductas de Riesgo Sexual de los Hombres Gay

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Resumen

El artículo tiene como objetivo contribuir a un entendimiento de las dinámicas psicosociales que subyacen en la relación entre las imágenes de la masculinidad heteronormativa, el heterosexismo internalizado y el comportamiento en salud de los hombres gay en el Norte globalizado. Para ello se basa en un estudio que a partir de entrevistas cualitativas realizadas en Alemania se centra en las consecuencias de la internalización de las imágenes dominantes de la masculinidad para las construcciones de la identidad de los hombres gay y sus comportamientos sexuales de riesgo relacionados con el VIH. En el documento se argumentará que 1) la tensión entre la imagen autoritaria de la masculinidad que se determina por los discursos heteronormativos por un lado, y la auto-imagen de género que se construye a partir de una homosexualidad no masculina constituye una cuestión decisiva en la construcción de la identidad gay, 2) un comportamiento sexual de riesgo más alto se puede entender como una posible consecuencia de la internalización de las imágenes masculinas y su impacto en la autoestima, si la propia imagen no coincide con el ideal masculino, y 3) lo que puede incluir el deseo paradójico de la masculinidad imaginado que se experimenta como violento con relación a las propias psicodinámicas. Por último, se discuten las perspectivas sobre las masculinidades homosexuales que pueden transgredir los modos dominantes de la heteronormatividad.

Palabras clave: masculinity, heteronormativity, internalized heterosexism, HIV/Aids, Psychosocial Studies

In the last decade a large body of literature has emphasized the importance of masculinity issues for the gender identity constructions of gay men. In this respect prevalent images of masculinity have been examined with regard to different national contexts like Spain (Guasch, 2011), Israel (Levon, 2012), Brazil (Parker, 2002), Japan (Eguchi, 2011), or the Philippines (Rubio & Green, 2009) and particular ethnic groups especially in North America and the Commonwealth like Latino (Ocampo, 2012), Puerto Rican (Asencio, 2011), African American (Hunter, 2010; LaSala & Frierson, 2012) gay man in the United States, or Asian gay men in Australia (Drummond, 2005). Based on Connell's theory of a hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) empirical studies have demonstrated the ongoing significance of heteronormative masculine images for negotiating gay identities in the Global North (e.g. Clarkson, 2006; Yeung, Stomblor & Wharton, 2006; Arxer, 2011; Wilson et al., 2010; see also Connell, 1992). From a social and health psychological perspective the implications of an internalization of heteronormative images on the psychological health outcomes of gay men have widely been discussed (e.g. Johnson et al., 2008; Kashubeck-West & Szymanski, 2008; Szymanski & Carr, 2008). Only few studies, however, have addressed the physical health implications of an internalized heterosexism (e.g. Halkitis, Green & Wilton, 2004; Hamilton & Mahalik, 2009). Referring to syndemics studies, which point at statistically evaluated concentrations of different epidemics (esp. of HIV infections, psychological problems, drug use) in gay men in the Global North that synergetically fuel each other (e.g. Stall et al., 2003; Singer & Scott, 2003; Singer et al., 2006), the assumption can be supported that experiences of stigmatization as gay men in a heteronormative social environment effect their health-related behavior. This paper is aimed at contributing to an empirically grounded understanding of the psychosocial dynamics that underlie the relation of heterosexist perceptions and experiences of gay men and their health behavior. It focuses on the consequences of the internalization of heteronormative images of masculinity for the identity constructions of gay men and their HIV-related sexual risk behavior in Germany.

Following Meyer and Dean (1998, p.162), internalized heterosexism can be understood as “the gay person's direction of negative social attitudes

toward the self, leading to a devaluation of the self and resultant internal conflicts and poor self-regard”. In this respect the paper examines the complex dynamics of internalizing heteronormative discourses and externalizing their effects in social practices, thus translating social power relations in intra-psychic conflicts and physical harm. The paper is based on findings of the qualitative study “Positive Desire” that was conducted in order to examine the backgrounds and dynamics of HIV-related risk behavior among gay men in Germany (Langer, 2009). The general results of the study suggest that biographical experiences of being rejected social recognition as a gay men in a heteronormative environment are inscribed into the subject’s identity construction, leading to a “spoiled identity” (to use a term coined by Goffman (1963) to denote stigma) and contributing to a particular vulnerability of gay men.

In the following second section of the paper a social psychological case vignette referring to a single interview of the study is presented that outlines the complex psychosocial dynamics that link the prevalence of heteronormative masculine images to sexual behavior. Since the interviews have been conducted in German it is necessary to note that any translation of the reported quotes from the study inevitably contain some semantic differences compared to the original texts. In the third section the psychosocial methodology of the study “Positive Desire” that was conducted in a peer research tradition is briefly outlined. The fourth section presents the results of the analyses the psychosocial dynamics, that was illustrated in the case vignette, in the context with further interviews of the study. In the final fifth section of the paper perspectives of a gay articulation and embodiment of non-heterosexist images of masculinity in heteronormative societies are discussed.

A case vignette

“For me (laughing), that is quite funny, I guess, but for me masculinity means a passive man, who, that, that is, that is kind of a preferred vision, such a, such a bodybuilder who can be passive for me. That is masculinity for me and I want to be so absolutely masculine at all times, but after all I’ve got the soul of a young girl. [...] And this is an experience that I, um, that I carry with me for,

for a couple of years now, that I am just, that I am just so TERRibly gay.” (Frank)

Within a few sentences the emotional range of Frank’s perception of masculinity becomes obvious. The sequence begins with his presentation of a preferred vision of an extreme masculinity, embodied in the image of a bodybuilder. This bodybuilder, however, does not represent a gender role model for Frank, but is someone he desires to be devoted to him and to penetrate for gaining a position of power. He imagines control over a masculinity that becomes a powerless object that he can possess. “[Q]uite funny” indeed – signaled also by the laughter at the very beginning of the sequence – is the reversal of conventional images of masculinity that are attributed with activity and power. The “passive man” is exactly the opposite. And yet for Frank the identification with the imaginatively penetrated other seems to be the only access to his own masculinity: through the possession of the other or, in Lacanian terminology, through his desire for the desire of the other (Lacan, 1979).

Nonetheless he recognizes in himself “the soul of a young girl”. Two different images of masculinity diverge in Frank’s account and produce an irritation that reflects his ambivalent exposure to his sexual identity. On the one hand the desired masculinity of the bodybuilder that he describes so affectively remains inaccessible: it is barely a function of the construction of his own male position. On the other hand a notion of masculinity is invoked that has a psychosocial dimension, correlating with Frank’s gay identity core that is pictured in the image of the “young girl”. His soul, understood as the “true” inner self in contrast to his outwardly manifested behavior that he describes as adjustable later in the interview, reveals Frank’s internalized self-image as multiple non-male: it is not a woman and not a girl, but explicitly a “young girl”. This self-image represents a burdened experience that Frank has to carry with him, as he metaphorically says. Although it is left open in his narrative what this soul is accounted for exactly, it is the clear opposition to a “man”, serving as a desirable reference-point that is significant here. In a social psychological perspective the desired extreme of the bodybuilder can be interpreted as a means for compensating a self-worth deficit as a gay man. The entire behavior he outlines in the interview shows a compulsive activity:

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Outwardly I try to... I now have this beard now and, um, and, yes, I would like to appear very masculine with a very deep voice, and I have worked on my walk, even as a teenager, that I walk very masculine and so on, and just in the sexual act I want to be the active, the real active part, this, this, this, I really like it.

The beard, the voice, the walk, the active position in sexual encounters: these characteristics, which symbolize masculinity for Frank, are all outwardnesses that are visible for an observer and can be interpreted within the dominant gender dichotomy without any difficulty. Stereotypical attributes of behavior invoke a traditional image of a heterosexual masculinity with societal normative functions. For Frank 'doing masculinity' means a life-long task that cannot be grounded in a natural 'being' and an unmarked position on the gender tableau.

The staging, however, is precarious, always on the edge of failing. He "wants" to appear "so absolutely masculine"; obviously he does not believe in that himself. Frank's voice becomes quieter as he talks about the experience of his gayness, he falters, as if he is frightened of the emerging insight. Only one syllable is highlighted clearly and loudly, when he noticed how "TERRibly gay" he is. Homosexuality spreads a terror for him that results from a kind of masculinity not accessible to him.

The identity fragments of masculinity and femininity that are inscribed in the sequence cannot be integrated into his self-image. The socially prefigured images of masculinity have action-guiding function for him. They constitute an incoherent 'I', pervaded by self-doubts. At the time of the interview Frank was 44 years old; he described himself as having a wide range of interests and being professionally successful in the arts sector. He was untested in terms of HIV, having been tested on HIV negative several years ago. Since then he has had always unprotected sex, he told, which had already led to two syphilis infections. He mentioned that he was "really scared" of HIV. The assumption that he might "not have coped with something" was addressed self-critically by Frank more than once in the interview. And yet the incorporated socially normative images of masculinity, which he desperately failed to fulfill again and again, constitute a binding ideal for him.

The image of the bodybuilder that Frank refers to in the interview is exemplary for a specific notion of masculinity in the gay community, at

least in the Global North (see e.g. [Lanzieri & Hildebrandt 2011](#); [Moskowitz & Hart 2011](#)). It serves as a signifier of masculinity, of a demarcation of the socially effective nexus of homosexuality and femininity, [Connell \(1995\)](#) emphasizes. Within the “heterosexual matrix” ([Butler, 1990](#)) being attracted to men signifies a kind of femininity – either of the body or the psyche – and leads to a unsettledness of gay men about their masculinity that may be experienced as a specific deficit:

“It is the relationship between identity and desire that is at stake here. While for heterosexuals the drive quasi-naturally follows from their identity – a stable gender identity guarantees the interest for the opposite sex –, for homosexuals the connection between identity and desire is reversely constructed within this logic. A misguided male identity is derived from the sexual interest in men. Whoever loves other men, cannot be a man himself. [...] With the assumption of a bound (or compulsive) heterosexual instinct, gays are denied their gender. ([Rehberg, 2005](#); translation from the German original by PCL; see also [Butler, 1997](#))

Therefore, one attempt to (re-)appropriate the denied gender is the adoption of (heterosexual) images of masculinity for gay purposes, a strategy that uses fragments of an unquestionable und positive connoted masculinity prevalent in the public discourse as a form to be filled with gay-specific contents. The ironic distance, which the adoption might reflexively be based on and which allows for a decontextualized functionalization in the first place, usually gets lost in the particular realization. Playing with these kinds of male roles may be successful in the context of the gay community, but with a change of the reference frame to the heterosexual mainstream society it tends to appear as an absurd parody.

Of course non-male images such as the ‘Drag Queen’ are also common in the gay culture and may be used for identification in a way that is aimed at a positive revaluation of gay stigma by affirming otherness and at a deconstruction of the prevailing gender order. However, as [Connell \(1995\)](#) notes:

“Not drag queens but ‘Castro Street clones’, equipped with jeans and T-shirts, moustaches and cropped hair, became the

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international leaders of style in gay communities in the later 1970s. The diversification of sexual scenes brought leather, SM and rough trade to a greater prominence. There may have been, as some argue, an element of parody in gay men's adoption of hyper-masculine styles. But there is little doubt about the cultural shift away from femininity..." (Connell 1995, p. 218)

Within the social organization of masculinity that Connell describes gays occupy the most prominent form of a subordinate masculinity, the lowest level of a rigid hierarchy, in which the other end is marked by the hegemonic masculinity "as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of the patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (*ibid.*, p. 77). Hegemonic masculinity is thus (theoretically) decoupled from empirically determinable social roles or social positions, but signifies the power to define the perception and interpretation of (gendered) social reality; it constitutes a discursive link between the cultural ideal and the institutional power. Undoubtedly the normative images of masculinity play a crucial role in the everyday social practices (not only) for gay men. They establish a conflicting dialectics for the subordinate masculinities by allowing for their acceptance through participation in social power at the cost of an internalized subordination. One might call it a dilemma: The orientation at (and taking over of) clichéd notions of hyper-masculinity signify the hope to occupy a socially legitimated position in the field of masculinities by rejecting any kind of (allocated) gay femininity and thus archiving a (putative) stable sexual identity that is disavowed in the first place by the existence of a hegemonic masculinity.

In this regard Pierre Bourdieu (2001) speaks of "symbolic violence": The governed (the gays) tend to take over imaginarily the dominant position (the hegemonic masculinity by Connell):

"Especially through the destiny effect produced by stigmatizing categorizations and in particular through real or potential insults, they can thus be led to apply to themselves and accept, under constraint, 'straight' categories of perception [...], and to feel ashamed of the sexual experience which, from the point of view of

the dominant categories, defines them...” (ibid., p. 119; accentuation by PB).

Gay life is thus inevitably shaped by experiences of (symbolic and/or real) violence – especially in its radical opposition to this dynamic. That does not mean of course that (at least symbolic) violence is always experienced consciously or becomes subject to an intentional reaction. Within the necessarily gendered socialization in a patriarchal and homosocial society (through family, peers, and media and others), heteronormative images of masculinity are internalized and pre-/unconsciously fixed and may never be embodied without problems by gay men.

As one of the latest images of masculinity the ‘gay skinhead’ has entered the stage in the last decade: “From the perspective of recent gay history the homosexual skinhead is the most popular ideal of masculinity in the post-AIDS era. You can place him in a logic of outdoing: masculine, more masculine, most masculine.” (Rehberg, 2005) Charged with notions of extreme aggression and violence and placed beyond a political and social acceptability by the connotation of the potential fascist neo-Nazi, the gay skinhead symbolized a kind of masculinity that socio-culturally contains a maximum of homophobia:

“The popularity of this character for gay men in a predominantly non-gay society is a sign that access to ‘masculinity’ is still denied to them and that assimilation for gay men is possible only under the sign of homophobia. The homosexual skinhead therefore marks a border. He is the figure of a gay anti-assimilation, a gay figure of protest.” (ibid, p.45)

It is not surprising at all that in this context that violent fantasies in the gay scene are being medially disseminated. An illustration of this can be seen in quite successful hardcore porn movies, picturing stories of brutal aggression such as rape and abuse as sexually desirable. Rape scenarios and notions of becoming a victim reflect a fascination with an imagined absolute ideal of masculinity that seems to promise a participation in it by identifying with the aggressor – or, paradoxically reversed, with the victims of this aggression.

The study “Positive Desire”

The social psychological case vignette presented above is taken from the study “Positive Desire” that was aimed at understanding the psychosocial dynamics underlying the significant rise in HIV diagnoses among gay men in Germany (as in most countries of the Global North) in the first decade of the 21st century. Its general approach is similar to the one developed in the context of the British Psychosocial Studies (see Frosh, 2003; Frosh & Baraitser, 2008; Hook, 2008; Lapping, 2011) in its psychoanalytically informed concern with dynamics of subjectification in the complex “interplay between what are conventionally thought of as ‘external’ social and ‘internal’ psychic formations” (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008, p. 347). This allows for “conceptualizing and researching a type of subject that is both social and psychological, which is constituted in and through its social formations, yet is still granted agency and internality” (*ibid.* p.349).

The study was designed in the tradition of participatory peer research (see e.g. Kindon, Pain & Kesby, 2007; Kuehner & Langer, 2010; Guta, Flicker & Roche, 2013): A majority of the 58 in-depth interviews with primarily self-identified gay men who recently received a positive HIV diagnosis (or, as Frank, reported sexual risk behavior in the context of an unknown HIV status) were conducted in 2006 and 2007 in two German cities (Berlin, Munich) by a HIV-positive gay identified man. In order to allow for an open and trustful articulation of highly sensitive, intimate, and potentially stigmatized issues concerning biographical backgrounds, social experiences as gay men in a heteronormative environment, sexual fantasies and practices, the infection with the HI-virus and coping with the disease, a peer interview approach was developed that was based on Holstein’s and Gubrium’s (1995, 2004) conceptualization of the “active interview”. It was aimed at facilitating the creation of interactive communicative spaces in the research encounter in which the interviewee could, for instance, return the questions he had been asked or the interviewer could bring in own experiences, in which both, thus, could engage in the joint production of accounts based on the perception of a shared life world. Although a guideline was used that included important topics and particular questions that should be covered and asked within the interviews, the course of the

interview was merely structured, but complied with the topics the interviewee brought in.

The interview partners were addressed as “experts” and recruited through AIDS service organizations, medical practitioners and clinics specialized on HIV/Aids, gay community magazines and gay online platforms. The selection of the 58 interviewees, who were offered 50 Euro for the interviews, followed the principle of a theoretical sampling in terms of Straussian Grounded Theory methodology (Strauss, 1998).

The interviews, which lasted between 50 and 240 minutes, were transcribed, using a detailed transcription system that paid attention to communicative characteristics such as pauses, accents, stammerings, laughings etc. Different methods of interpretation – open coding according to Grounded Theory methodology, interaction and narration analysis, ethno-hermeneutic interpretative techniques – were applied to the data in order to answer different research questions that came up in the course of the research process (see Langer 2008, 2009; Langer, Drewes & Kuehner 2010; Langer 2013b; for methodological and ethical issues see Kuehner & Langer 2010; Langer 2013a, 2014). In this regard the role of images of masculinity that is subject of this article has emerged as an interesting issue. The findings presented in the next section refer to a psychoanalytically informed psycho-social-analysis (Roseneil, 2006, 2007, 2009).

Psychodynamics of internalized heterosexism in the context of HIV

The presented case vignette has demonstrated basic features of the complex psychosocial dynamics of HIV-related sexual risk behavior of gay men in the context of effective social notions of masculinity that can be seen in many of the other interviews of the study as well. Re-contextualized within the analyses of these interviews three findings are to be outlined in this section.

Firstly, the tension between the authoritative image of masculinity that is determined by heteronormative discourses on the one hand and the gendered self-image that is shaped and threatened by connotations of a non-masculine homosexuality on the other constitutes a decisive issue of gay identity constructions. Masculinity is, as another interviewee noted, “a topic for all gays. [...] I know only few gay men who have kind of an unbroken masculinity” (Simon). Taking up this formulation, homosexuality signifies

a broken – injured, wounded – manhood. The fracture lies in the discrepancy between the socially dominant – and for societies of the Global North that means: heteronormative – notions of masculinity, which are materialized through a variety of socialization processes and constitute a central point of reference for gay identity formations, and the individual experiences of a deeply problematic gendered ‘being a man’. Following Simon’s account he describes himself as “almost envious” to his heterosexual brother who “is married, has two children, and I think he regards himself as good and beautiful and attractive alright. And he is not more beautiful and attractive than I am, I think, and I, I do not have such an unbroken relation to [or rather: relationship with; the German word “Beziehung” that Simon used in the interview connotes both; PCL] my manhood.”

Simon presents two references of his masculine image in this account: the heterosexual marriage and family that suggest as a stable and secure framework for social identity articulations and physical characteristics of beauty and attractiveness that may grant or threaten self-esteem. Markings that can be observed on the body surface consequently play an important role for Simon’s representation of masculinity. In the interview he speaks of a “fitness craze” that he has in order to “look athletic at least or appear like a man” and clothes as obvious forms of gender representations in the public: “Or I wear carpenter pants or a training jacket or whatever. One wants to be perceived as a man.” The given examples are not oriented randomly to externals, but they are those references that make gender visible and interpretable in the everyday social practices. In the sense of “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman 1987) they are the easiest way of demonstrating gender: masculinity as masquerade.

The finding of an idealized patriarchal and heteronormative masculinity performance in the interviews is consistent with recent international research, as mentioned in the introduction (see also Simonsen, Blazina & Watkins, 2000; Halkitis, 2001, Johnson et al., 2008). Such performance focus on body attributes and sexual behavior; the following interview statements illustrate this: “tall, muscular” (Bernd), “little macho-like” (Ben), “three-day beard” (Ulrich, Wolfgang), “masculine appearance, meaty type ”(Dirk), “such a dark type and broad shoulder” (Volker), “my IMAGE what I adore so much, it’s these Turkish macho men who appear

really masculine and male from their very occurrence” (Ralf). The term “hunter” is mentioned several times as well; Frank, for instance, states: “A man is a hunter by nature. And he has to kill the game. That’s what I have realized about me once. And if you do not have that, you feel mean and bad”.

Secondly, a higher sexual risk behavior may therefore be understood as a possible consequence of the internalization of such heteronormative masculinity and its impact on the self-esteem, if the self-image does not match the male ideal. Given the outlined social representations of a heteronormative masculinity a discomfort regarding the perception of one’s own masculinity is manifest in many of the interviews, either in explicit accounts – such as Frank’s – or in implicit non-verbal expressions such as an embarrassed laughter to suggest an ironic distancing from the reported desired images, nevertheless hinting at feelings of inadequacy and a possible deficient self-worth. In this respect Axel sums up somewhat embarrassed: “So I kinda not feel masculine somehow, no idea, so I’m, uh, slightly had always got a complex somehow.” Max also reported that he felt “not very masculine“ and that he was “just upset that some people come to me: You’re gay, aren’t you? And I think to myself: Damn! How come?! It’s not marked on my forehead! What’s going on?”

Two strategies of response to the articulated problem of not feeling or not being perceived masculine are presented in the interviews. One strategy the interviewees talk about refers to their attempts to (over-)compensate the perceived lack of masculinity by deliberately staging a socially acknowledged firm masculinity through surface performance (such as clothing or bodybuilding). However, since this strategy is dependent upon the recognition of the other to a high degree and is seen as non-authentic, its production is constantly threatened by failure. As a second remarkable strategy found in the interviews is a clear and vehement and often aggressive distancing from anything that might be interpreted as feminine gay stereotypes. Two interview statements may illustrate this:

“Well, I indeed have a problem with these, this campy gays, [...] Sometimes I just find it a bit disturbing that there are gays in the community that walk around with the feather boa or something during the day, that seems a bit disturbing to me, and that’s always

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something that I think to myself, no, I do not want to belong to them.” (Andreas)

“Speaking generally and frankly: I can’t stand this reaching for the cleavage and broken wrists thing. I find it quite terrible. EVERYONE shall do everything in his own way, but I also can’t stand those wearers of women’s clothes. That I hate them GUTS [the respective German phrase “auf den Tod” includes the word “death” instead of “guts”; PCL]. [...] That DISGUSTS me.” (Robert).

It is a femininity bashing, which runs through a large number of the interviews. The depreciation of an (imagined) femininity communicatively constructs a ‘more masculine’ position that seems to promise a higher degree of social recognition and self-worth in the gay scene as well as in the mainstream society. It refers to an internalized heterosexism, which not only covers a fragile self-image, but contributes to stigmatizing and discriminatory discourses and practices in the gay scene. What remains in many cases, however, is a vague awareness of the fragility of the own image, as individual attributes of the rejected femininity conform to the self-reported behavior of the interviewees.

Hence, sexual risk behavior appears as one possible consequence of a diminished self-esteem regarding to the sense of masculinity of the interviewees. The fact that the risk behavior specifically deals with sexuality may be interpreted against the background of the significance of sexuality for gay men’s gender identity constructions and the search for social recognition through sex (Langer, 2009). Since the social identity of gay men is attached to their sexuality, it is reasonable to suggest that experiences of being rejected social recognition for one’s identity construction are also acted out in the field of sexuality.

Thirdly, the analyses of the interviews hint at a paradoxical desire for the imagined masculinity that is experienced as violent with regard to one’s own psychodynamics. It seems paradoxical that despite far-reaching reflections of these fatal dynamics, nearly no resistance to the outlined masculinity norms seemed to be available in most of the interviews; on the contrary, in many cases a desire for precisely this kind of masculinity and

its actual physical violence is expressed. Again Simon gives a concise description of a quite exemplary scene:

I was at a sex party recently. And there was a guy who was super sexy and manly and attractive. And I've also done something unsafe with him, and I think, if he had not been so attractive and manly, then I probably wouldn't have done that. But that has somehow made me so uncontrollably, I was so intoxicated: Wow, this great guy wants me!

Simon is highly aware of the risk situation and he reflects, as indicated above, the compulsive character of his binding image of masculinity, which he tries to do fulfill through the enactment of appropriate symbols, at least outwardly. Within this evaluation framework the “guy” at the sex party embodies his ideal of masculinity that he can never match in his eyes. Despite his knowledge (and, as expressed later in the interview, his fear) of the risk situation due to the potential health consequences (such as an infection with hepatitis C in particular) he engaged in “something unsafe”. The desire of the other means recognition and results in an increase of self-esteem that can only be described as “intoxication”. The term intoxication, however, indicates not only a dangerous engagement but also the short-term nature of this added value, its illusory character. The temporary participation in the imagined masculinity that requires the other as a mirror of the self goes along with the acceptance of potentially permanent damage. The crucial factor here is the merging of masculinity idea and unprotected sex. Because safer sex has been constituted as an absolute standard of behavior in the gay community as a result of the AIDS pandemic, anonymous unsafe sex signifies a break of a taboo, which needs to be understood in relation to the present homosexual life world that has undergone rapid changes in the last two decades in Germany and many other countries of the Global North. Increasing social acceptance of homosexuality and a “mainstreaming” of the gay community allow only for few ways to gain identity meaning from the self-perception as ‘other’; unsafe sexual behavior is thus a potentially ‘positive’ point of reference of otherness in contrast to a perceived normalized gay life world, a means for staging a projected ‘raw’ masculinity.

Perspectives on gay masculinities beyond heteronormative subjectifications

The previous section has pointed at possible links between the latent internalization of heteronormative images of masculinity and manifest sexual risk behavior, based on the analysis of the 58 interviews of the study. The application of a psychosocial framework to the analysis of empirical material, however, always runs the risk of over-interpretation by either reassuring the premises of the psychoanalytical framework or suggesting latent psychosocial phenomena that may only partially be grounded in the data (Frosh & Emerson, 2005). In this regard the considerations of self-worth issues, for instance, pose only one possible reading of the interviews that need to take into account that it has not been derived from clinical, but research setting. It would therefore be interesting to read this interpretation against other interpretations of the material based on different methods of analysis. The expected criticism of contributing to an ongoing pathologization of gay men (a brief review is given by Meyer, 2003) by these considerations can be countered by pointing out that it is not the interviewees who are subject to pathologization, but it is the heteronormative social order that is addressed as spoiling the social identity formation of gay men in a Goffmanian sense (Goffman, 1963). Therefore, health prevention approaches with regard to HIV and Aids should not only (and may not even primarily) focus on 'risky' practices of gays, but need to fight the stigmatizing discourses and practices of the heteronormative mainstream society (Langer, 2009, Langer et al., 2010).

Two more notes of precaution need to be mentioned. The analysis shows further psychosocial dynamics that led to HIV infection in certain cases; lacks of knowledge about protection, for example, are still an issue, despite the claim of an overwhelming level of preventive knowledge in the general population and among men having sex with men in particular. And the emphasize of dynamics related to guiding images of a heteronormative masculinity is not to suggest that there are not non-discursive breaks in the interviews that are opposed to these fatal dynamics. In this respect three strategies can be identified from the study material. Firstly, some interviewees try to apply different concepts of masculinity that do not refer to any physical characteristics or behavior, but to the definition of values

that are beyond the conventional gender dichotomy. An example for this strategy is presented by Uwe who refers to masculinity “rather abstract” in terms of “silence”: “For me this condition of absolute ease is the realization of masculinity (laughing).” Against the background of his regular stays in a (purely male) monastery in which speaking is strictly forbidden his concept of masculinity is extremely individualized and removed from the usual gender-based rating scheme. The attempts of detaching oneself from a heteronormative masculinity in this kind appear, however, designed defensively and remain still under the spell of which they are to free. Secondly, various forms of a playful and ironic coping with notions of masculinity are thematized in some interviews. In this regard Jan talks about his conscious production and performance of gender and gender roles in the gay scene, in which he plays with the expectations of others to create new scopes of action: “With a baseball cap, when going out, great, yes. Not even my own mother would recognize me this way.” He seems to know exactly how he is perceived: “the straight number one here today”. Jonathan, another interviewee, also describes how he could “perform” a particular “male image”. In her queer approach of a performative gender parody, Judith Butler (1990) has theoretically and programmatically outlined this strategy of dealing with gender norms grounded in the “heterosexual matrix” in such ways. Based on the deconstructivist claim that each repetition always creates deviation, Butler envisage a shift of the power relations inscribed in gender. Following the respective narratives in the interviews, however, this seems to work only situationally in the sexual interaction. It requires a far-reaching reflection on these normative ideas that are at least partially internalized and have solidified as a habit; the scene descriptions in which unprotected sex are reported also suggest that this reflection and irony mode had been turned off as soon as the imagined ideal type had entered the stage: a sexual desire for exactly the image of masculinity that one was to ironize arose.

Thirdly, in very few interviews a search for ‘new’ gender attributions of masculinity was evident that ultimately – and paradoxically – leads to the conscious and intended search for HIV infection. In these interviews the infected body was presented as an object of masculine fascination. The following sequence illustrates the stimulus to consciously move in a risk

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situation and surrender oneself to the violence of the other, a known HIV-positive gay man:

PCL: Do you feel tempted to become a victim?

Tom: (7 second pause) Whether it is the victim, I do not know. (5 second pause) But maybe being at someone's mercy or this, perhaps victim in the sense that the other determines, so to speak, or has the significant influence.

PCL: What is cool about it?

Tom: Because you gives up yourself completely. For the other you are only an object. Only, so to speak, expressed very scratchy, you are just there for use, for disposal.

Certainly this scene is not generalizable. However, it shows in extremis the significance of HIV in the gay community. Beyond common characteristics of male power an essentially new dimension comes into play through the known HIV infection of Tom's sexual partner: He does not only symbolically have the phallus, it also provides a very real (and yet imaginary, because invisible, time-shifted, merely potential) threat of death. In this sense the HIV positive man embodies the greatest power over the other. Tom surrenders to this power, demoting himself to a purely passive object of desire. Within the sexual game he participates in the imagined masculinity of the other, which in turn is dependent on his willing to surrender. Nevertheless, Tom is highly aware that he breaks the safe sex norm that still prevalent within the gay community with his intentional risk-taking behavior. For him the 'raw' sex that he desires and that the positive man signifies, is a mode of non-alienated gayness that has not been adjusted by social normalization and disciplining mechanisms. It is a sex beyond the fear of AIDS as a collective trauma of the gay community in the Global North that by means of physical violence exceeds the symbolic violence of the dichotomous gender order: in the simultaneity of traditional male and female attributes of power and powerlessness, activity and passivity, normality and subversion, life and death, a desire surfaces that locates the gay subject beyond the social attributions as man or woman.

Therefore, the question remains, how the fatal dynamics presented here on the basis of the interviews (which of course are not representative of 'the gays' in Germany due to the qualitative designs and the focus on HIV-

positive gay men) can be broken in order to allow for an autonomous gender identity construction? If it is fair to say that heteronormative images of masculinity have a significant impact on the health risk behavior of gay men, a promising – but anything but simple – approach will have to establish other images of a ‘successful’ masculinity within the gay community. In this regard Peters (2010) has examined postpunk queer youth culture and its emphasize of an ‘emo gay masculinity’. However, given the increasing integration of gay life into the heterosexual mainstream society and the consequent possibility of social recognition of previously constructed ‘others’, this is not to be expected in the near future. Just because gay lifestyles seem to gain greater acceptance, the probability increases that heteronormative perception and interpretation mechanisms will gain even more validity in the gay community. Thus practicing unsafe Sex (also) signifies a desire for differentiation and resistance, for an added value of an ‘other life’ (see Crossley 2004; Haig 2006; Tomso 2008). Whether the phenomenon of ‘slamming’, recently noticed in parts of the gay scene in major cities like New York, London, Berlin or Barcelona, that refers to injecting party drugs such as crystal meth or mephedrone in excessive sex sessions for days without limits and that goes along with the fetishization of the positive other and a fascination of (self-) annihilation can be interpreted in this sense is a question that needs further research to be answered. However, the imaginary position occupied by the positive body of the infected in parts of the gay scene, is also to be understood as a desperate cry: for a positively constructed and sovereign gay identity beyond a momentous internalized heterosexism.

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