

Romantic Relationships and Their Social Context Among Gay/Bisexual Male Youth in the Castro District of San Francisco

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ABSTRACT. This article examines the culture of romantic relationships among gay/bisexual male youth in the Castro District of San Francisco.

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The article seeks to specify the cultural ideology that informs these relationships, drawing upon ethnographic observation, autobiographical accounts, and informant cultural exegesis. The article also seeks to link thinking and experience inside romantic relationships (e.g., bonding, jealousy) to patterns of social behavior associated with romantic relationships (e.g., relationship sequestering, cheating), showing how both are informed by shared assumptions which make these emotions and gestures intelligible to the group. Beliefs about love, compatibility, and monogamy are explored. Reciprocity, including its degradation into negative forms, is examined with focus on the units of value that are exchanged in romantic relationships, in particular sentimental gifts. Gestures of commitment that mark commencement of a romantic relationship as well as extension of the dynamics of a relationship after “breakup” (as in “revenge sex” and “rebound relationships”) are examined. Cultural systems that challenge adherence to a romantic ideology, such as a prestige economy associated with sex linked to an ethos of sexual exploration/recreation, are weighed against the pull of romance. “Drama,” a hallmark of gay youth, is viewed in the context of romantic culture.

KEYWORDS. Gay male adolescents, romantic relationships, peer cultures, sexual behavior, drama

INTRODUCTION

There is a larger generation of openly gay youth in the United States than ever before, due to changes in social acceptance and increasing media visibility. Social support for gay and lesbian youth has also increased, with gay youth services in numerous cities and with “gay/straight alliances” in many urban and suburban high schools. There are more social resources for gay youth than in past generations, even if these resources are not evenly dispersed demographically. With increased opportunities to meet and interact, an increasing number of gay youth now embark upon what has long been the privilege of heterosexual adolescents—romantic relationships. A romantic relationship is defined as a voluntary ongoing pattern of association and interaction between two individuals typically based on intense or passionate sexual attraction and characterized by intimacy, companionship, caring, and friendship (Brown, Feiring, & Furman, 1999: 3-4). This article examines romantic rela-

tionships among gay/bisexual male youth in the Castro District of San Francisco. The article describes and analyzes the cultural ideology that informs these relationships, drawing upon ethnographic observation, autobiographical accounts, and informant cultural exegesis. The article also links the thinking of individuals who are in romantic relationships to patterns of peer social behavior associated with romantic relationships, showing how both are informed by shared assumptions that make the emotions and gestures of romantic participants intelligible to the group.

By far the most extensively researched aspect of adolescent gay male life in the United States has been the risk of exposure to HIV and other Sexually Transmitted Infections (cf. Hays, Rebchook, & Kegeles, 2003; Koblin et al., 2003; Koblin et al., 2000; Solorio, Swendeman, & Rotheram-Borus, 2003; Valleroy et al., 2000; Waldo, McFarland, Katz, MacKellar, & Valleroy, 2000). Related studies have addressed risk and substance use (Greenwood et al., 2001; Orenstein, 2001). There is a considerable literature advising medical and mental health professionals how to respectfully and effectively treat gay youth (Allen, Glick, Beach, & Naylor, 1998; Garofalo & Katz, 2001; Ryan & Futterman, 1998; Stevens & Morgan, 2001). Research has also been conducted on school environments and educational needs of gay youth (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001; Unks, 1995). Large numbers of young gay men and lesbians have been disowned by their families and there is a significant body of research on gay youth and homelessness (Auerswald & Eyre, 2002; Clatts, Davis, Sotheran, & Atillasoy, 1998; Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002; Noell & Ochs, 2001) and the important topic of sex work (Clatts, Goldsamt, Neaigus, & Welle, 2003; Clatts, Goldsamt, & Yi, 2005; Clatts, Hillman, Atillasoy, & Davis, 1999; Coleman, 1989; Elifson, Boles, Posey, Sweat, et al., 1993; Weber et al., 2001).

Psychological research on gay youth has focused on coming out and the different developmental paths of gay youth (Anhalt & Morris, 1998; Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz, & Smith, 2001; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). Links between homophobia and violence have also been investigated (Russell, Franz, & Driscoll, 2001; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1996). The most controversial area of psychological research with young gay men and lesbians has been suicide, with methodological disagreements and also political resistance to acknowledging this problem (Bagley & Tremblay, 2000; Kulkin, Chauvin, & Perle, 2000; Morrison & L'Heureux, 2001; Remafedi, 1999, 2002).

The crucial importance of family relations to self-development for gay youth and the dilemma of disclosure to homophobic family mem-

bers have been examined (D'Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington, 1998; Savin-Williams, 2001; Waldner & Magruder, 1999). A limited amount of research on young gay men of color has focused on the stresses and complications of identity formation (Dube & Savin-Williams, 1999; Monteiro & Fuqua, 1993; Savin-Williams, 1996b) and on the risks of HIV infection (Bingham et al., 2003; Choi, Han, Hudes, & Kegeles, 2002; Diaz, 1998; Kraft, Beeker, Stokes, & Peterson, 2000; Mays, Cochran, & Zamudio, 2004; Peterson & Carballo-Diéguez, 2000; Peterson, Coates, Catania, Hauck, et al., 1996; Peterson, Coates, Catania, Middleton, et al., 1992; Peterson & Marin, 1988).

The significance of social resources for gay and lesbian adolescents is described in Herdt and Boxer's *Children of Horizons* (1993). In a study situated in a Chicago gay youth support services agency, Herdt and Boxer examined gay youth sexual identity development, the coming-out process, and social life within the youth center with a sample that was 60% non-white. Our research with a similar group, in contrast, was situated on the street and in local hangouts where informants were studied using participant observation and recruited for interviews that were always conducted off the premises of service providers. This street- and multi-venue approach focused on the youth's non-adult-regulated social environment and was intended to capture a peer reality not easily studied in an institutional setting.

There have been two good overviews of romantic relationships among gay youth that have described some of the large social and cultural factors that complicate potential romantic relationships among gay youth (Diamond, Savin-Williams, & Dube, 1999; Savin-Williams, 1996a). The romantic relationship, as opposed to casual sexual encounters or isolated dates, may be seen by gay youth as a confirmation of gay identity and self-hood, while homophobic parents and peers may discourage or punish these relationships for the same reason.

To place these relationships in context, evidence suggests the near universality of human passion in human societies (Jankowiak, 1995). A burgeoning literature on adolescent heterosexual romance explores the romantic relationships of early adolescents (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 2004; Feiring, 1996; Rosenthal, Burklow, Lewis, Succop, & Biro, 1997), mid to late adolescents (Feldman & Gowen, 1998; Furman, 2002; Levesque, 1993), and female adolescents (Eder, 1993; Gilligan, Lyons, Hanmer, & Emma Willard School (Troy N.Y.), 1990; Kuttler & La Greca, 2004). Among other things, this literature addresses the relationship of romance to dating (Harper, Gannon, Watson, Catania, & Dolcini, 2004; Roscoe, Diana, & Brooks, 1987), other peer relation-

ships (Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000; Feiring, 1999; Zimmer-Gembeck, Siebenbruner, & Collins, 2004), depression (Joyner & Udry, 2000; Welsh, Galliher, Kawaguchi, & Rostosky, 1999), and violence (Wolfe & Feiring, 2000). Complex social (Dunphy, 1963) as well as cognitive (Furman & Simon, 1999) models of adolescent romantic attachment have been proposed. A smaller literature on adult romance (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Pistole, 1994; Sharpsteen & Kirkpatrick, 1997), is dominated by attachment theory. Literatures on monogamy (e.g., Terrault, 2002) and promiscuity (e.g., Ginter, Soyer, & Rieger, 1992) explore these topics mostly with respect to STD transmission and animal behavior.

METHODS

Informants

In addition to ethnographic observation over a 2-year period, individual interviews with 30 gay and bisexual male youth (ages 15-20, mean = 18.3 years) were conducted. Ten percent of the sample identify themselves as "bisexual." On the Kinsey scale of sexual attraction, 0% of the sample represent themselves as 1 (attracted to girls only), 3% as 2, 3% as 3 (attracted equally to girls and guys), 14% as 4, 39% as 5, and 41% as 6 (attracted to guys only). Race-ethnicity for the sample was 26% African American, 18% white, 15% Filipino, 15% Mexican-American, 11% other Latino, 4% Japanese, 4% Samoan, 4% Native American, and 3% other.

Procedures

Gay/bisexual male youth in the Castro were studied using a venue-based approach that included participants based on their involvement in a gay/bisexual youth street scene. In a venue-based approach, central locations are identified where the target group congregates and then one or more of these locations is used to establish face-to-face contact with informants. Once rapport is established with some informants using participant observation, the ethnographer follows these informants to other less visible locations where more informants may be contacted using a snowball procedure. The initial venue from which informants were recruited for this study was Castro Street between Market Street and 18th Street. Most interaction with informants occurred within a four-block ra-

dus of this central location, locally defined as “the Castro.” Recruitment for interviews was used as a means of contacting new potential informants who might then be observed and interacted with. Thomas Strong, a doctoral student in anthropology (last author), conducted the interviews and the ethnography. At the time, Strong, a gay white male, was approximately 7 years older than members of the target group. Interviews lasted 40 minutes on average, and ranged from 20 minutes to 80 minutes depending on the availability and the productivity of each informant. Four participants who had ongoing romantic relationships during the 2-year period of research became key informants, completing several interviews over the course of the study. Adolescents received a \$20.00 CD gift certificate for participation in an interview. The entire research protocol was approved by the IRB of the University of California, San Francisco.

Measures

We used two research methodologies in our two-year study of gay/bisexual youth culture in the Castro: participant observation and biographical interviewing. In the interviews, informants were asked to provide sexual and relationship histories. These interviews were tape recorded and then transcribed.

Analysis

We utilized Vernacular Concept Analysis (VCA, Eyre, in review) to identify cultural models in the ethnographic and interview data. Following VCA procedures, interview transcripts were entered into NUDIST and indexed using a system of content-based topics derived from the data. The four authors—three anthropologists and a Ph.D. candidate in English Literature—analyzed the ethnographic and interview data. Each analyst had direct knowledge of the population. Prior to every analytic session, each member of the analytic team read an index extraction of approximately 100 pages selected at the previous session by the team. In the course of reading these extractions, each analyst would identify short passages (e.g., 20 lines) suitable for close analysis, based on judgment of their relevance to the topic of romantic relationships. The team then collectively selected an appropriate number of these short passages to analyze in a given session. Analysis of one passage generally took approximately one half hour. Analysis is a process of interpreting short passages that have been selected to further understanding of cultural models related to the topic under analysis. The team sought to reach consensus in

their analysis of each passage, gradually building an understanding of a range of cultural models. Each analytic session was recorded in a summary by the team leader (Eyre), who took notes during each session. The analytic narrative was then assembled by the team leader based on an organization developed by the team of materials recorded in the summaries. This analytic narrative was finally abbreviated for article presentation.

RESULTS

The Venue

The Castro sits at the top of Market Street, a major thoroughfare that cuts diagonally across San Francisco. Major subway lines run from downtown San Francisco underneath Market Street up toward the Castro, connecting to bus lines running north over the main ridge of the city toward the San Francisco Bay. The gay community claims the Castro as its village, but the Castro is a multicultural community. Castro merchants are frequently heterosexual and predominantly white, but also Asian, Latino, and Middle Eastern. The gay community has lost some control of Castro residence in the wake of the AIDS epidemic. Many heterosexuals now live in the area, which has some of the highest valued real estate in the city. The Castro has one main business district featuring a range of restaurants, bookstores, home furnishing shops, a movie theatre, and a number of establishments plying cosmetic or beauty products. Alongside these shops and services, the Castro has twenty gay bars: one small African American bar, one video bar catering to a twenty-something crowd, one twenties-to-thirties dance bar, one mixed dance bar, and other bars each with some nuance that attracts gay men from the neighborhood and the city as a whole. The Castro has one sex club near the center of the District. To this day, selectively enforced dress codes or other measures keep Asians, blacks, and other non-whites out of some of the bars. The adult Castro gay scene is predominantly white.

We selected the Castro for a study of gay/bisexual youth because we assumed we would find numerous white gay/bisexual youth there. We intended to contrast the white gay/bisexual youth culture in the Castro with a black gay/bisexual youth culture in Oakland that we were also studying at the time. The numerous youth who congregate on the streets of the Castro, however, are predominantly gay/bisexual youth of color. This is in part because, unlike their non-white counterparts, the smaller

number of white gay/bisexual youth that come to the Castro have an easy time gaining entrance to many of the bars, where they are absorbed into a predominantly white adult social environment. The fact is that in the Castro the cultural contrast between the gay/bisexual youth community visible on the streets and the predominantly adult gay community that inhabits the bars is as much one of race-ethnicity and socioeconomic status as it is one of age.

The Social Context

The Group

At the center of the young male gay/bisexual social scene in the Castro is an informal group consisting of approximately 10 core members in their mid to late teens who come to the Castro on a near daily basis, as well as 20 or so peripheral members who are connected to the core group but who do not come to the Castro as frequently. These “boys,” as they are known among themselves, engage in activities such as roaming the Castro, eating or watching others eat at a local hamburger spot, looking at CDs at the local Tower Records outlet, hanging out at a local cafe, and assembling at night at Collingwood Park to drink and smoke pot and get picked up in cars for sex by older residents of the Castro and surrounding communities. These “boys” also participate in rap groups, dances, and other activities offered by a local organization serving gay/bisexual youth. The core group is highly cohesive; its members interact almost exclusively with each other. An unstable group hierarchy is determined primarily by reputation based on sexual exploits, loquacity, and to a lesser degree fighting.

Newcomers typically undergo a membership test that assesses their availability and suitability as sexual partners. One or more of the “boys” conduct a ritualized interrogation to determine the preferred sexual role of the newcomer. One of the first questions asked is whether the newcomer is a “top” or a “bottom” (whether he plays the insertive or receptive role in anal intercourse). This information is added to the newcomer’s visible “type,” assessed primarily in terms of race-ethnicity, to determine the newcomer’s suitability as a sexual partner for other particular individuals. We term the meaning system through which a potential partner’s sexual role and type is defined *partner semiotics*. There is often competition as to which of the “boys” will have sex with or form a romantic relationship with a newcomer. There is no assurance, however, that any

newcomer will be accepted into the group after having sex or having a relationship with one of its members.

The “boys” have special greetings, which include nicknames and hugs, to indicate insiderness. “Boys” may become friends and share secrets, but competition checks intimacy. “Boys” mentor one another, often calling each other “B I T”—“bitches in training.” A “bitch in training” is a “boy” who is learning to be dramatic, judgmental, and hyper-feminine—in short, a “bitch.” The concept of “bitchiness” is ironized and is a source of affectionate humor among the “boys.”

Sex Seeking

We term pursuit of sex *sex seeking*. The activity of sex seeking is never far beneath the surface of group social life, sometimes pursued by individual “boys” and sometimes pursued as a cooperative venture by the group. Cruising is the prototype of sex seeking. If a “boy” intends to cruise, he may dress attractively for the occasion, but much cruising is impromptu and fortuitous. Cruising can occur in coded as well as uncoded settings. A *coded* setting is a place like the Castro that is frequented by homosexual men who cruise and know the signals of cruising. *Uncoded* settings are heterosexual environments such as school and restaurants where overtures need to be more explicit, negotiations more covert, and liaisons deferred to a later date. Many gay “boys” like cruising “straight”-appearing boys, assuming them to be masculine and “top.”

Cruising involves moving through an environment. One typically cruises strangers. If a “boy” is actively cruising, he will notice and assess strangers in terms of their attractiveness and apparent availability (i.e., if they are alone). If a stranger appears attractive, the “boy” may position himself so as to be noticed by the stranger. If the interaction occurs on the sidewalk, noticing, assessing, and giving a sustained look of interest all occur simultaneously. Once eye contact is established, there is a moment in which intent is recognized and communication of interest or lack of interest takes place. This is largely communicated with the eyes, an averted gaze indicating non-interest. If mutual interest is established, the two parties will stop and engage in small talk, after which a negotiation will be made as to when and where the sexual liaison will take place. “Boys” like to tell stories about their exploits, and evaluative recounting of sexual encounters to peers often follows sex.

Cruising often occurs in a group context, in which case the group will assess the appropriateness of an attractive stranger as a sex partner for one

or another group member. "Boys" may jockey for the position of the interested party. Once it has been established who the interested party is, other group members may assume intermediary roles, which can include conveying the interested party's interest to the stranger. If an interested party allows another "boy" to act as a go-between, however, there is always the risk that the stranger will find the go-between more attractive, changing a story of sexual liaison into a more interesting story of betrayal.

An individual "boy's" own narratives of his sexual encounters and relationships, combined with observational and rumor-based stories of his behavior, comprise an important part of his reputation. "Boys" compete for prestige associated with having frequent, attractive sexual partners. This competitive motive often overpowers interest in having a romantic relationship such that interaction with potential sexual and romantic partners is often driven by concerns for prestige. Some "boys" keep written "lists" of their partners that they cultivate like resumes. "Boys" so internalize the prestige concerns of their community that these concerns operate like personal values, with an elevation of status being subjectively experienced as an increase in self-esteem even when stories of sex with attractive partners go unrecounted.

Instrumental Sex

Two named strategies, "cock blocking" and "stepping over," illustrate the instrumental use of sexual partners in service of competitive goals. The following terms are used to describe each strategy. [Aggressor] is the actor who carries out an instrumental strategy. [Target] is the intended object of the strategy, typically a rival. [Pawn] is the vehicle of the strategy, the person whom [Aggressor] manipulates into having sex. In "cock blocking," [Aggressor] dislikes [Target] and notices that [Target] is attracted to and wants to have sex with [Pawn]. [Aggressor] then proceeds to have sex with [Pawn] before [Target] has a chance, thereby "cock blocking" [Target]. [Aggressor]'s motivation is to spite and humiliate [Target]. In "stepping over" [Aggressor] and [Target] are friends. [Target] is attracted to [Pawn] and talks to [Aggressor] about his attraction and his plans to "hook up" with [Pawn]. [Aggressor] then "steps over" [Target] by having sex with [Pawn] before [Target] does. [Aggressor]'s motivation here is rivalry toward [Target] as well as attraction to [Pawn]. In both cases, [Aggressor]'s sex with [Pawn] is instrumental to performing a competitive or hostile action toward [Target]. [Pawn] is a vehicle in the transaction. Such *instrumentality*, in which sexual and potentially romantic aspirations are made subservient to competitive ma-

neuvering between “boys,” is one impediment to romance among Castro gay/bisexual youth.

Relationship-spoiling is an additional type of action in which [Aggressor] intervenes in an emerging sexual and romantic relationship between [Target] and [Pawn] and spoils the relationship, motivated by attraction to [Pawn] and rivalry toward [Target]. Here is an account of relationship-spoiling by a 15-year-old “boy”:

It’s easy, man, [to break up a relationship]. It’s easy. . . . I [Aggressor] had sex with [Pawn] and then I found out he had a boyfriend, [Target]. So, I went to [Target]. I [Aggressor] told him what happened between me and [Pawn]. . . . [Target] confronted [Pawn] about it. And they were still together, but then me [Aggressor] and [Pawn] had sex again and I [Aggressor] told [Target] about it [again]. . . . [Pawn] had told me that he told [Target] what was going on, but I [Aggressor] didn’t believe [Pawn]. I [Aggressor] knew [Pawn] wouldn’t tell his boyfriend [Target] that. So, I [Aggressor] told [Target] just to try to break him and [Pawn] up so I [Aggressor] could have [Pawn]. So [Target] broke up with [Pawn]. [Pawn] doesn’t have anyone. But I [Aggressor] can’t get with [Pawn] ‘cause he doesn’t want me anymore.

Here, the main strategy of breaking up a relationship is to have sex with a desired partner [Pawn] and then to confront [Target], the other partner, with the infidelity. The motive in this account appears to be actual desire for [Pawn], but relationship spoiling is often malicious, with the perpetrator harming the relationship without wishing to obtain one of the partners for himself. Stories of having sex with someone’s relationship partner need not be true to have a destructive effect. “Talking shit” about a relationship partner (spreading often false rumors of bad behavior) is a common way of seeking to break a couple apart.

Drama

In addition to competition and enmity, motivation to break up a romantic relationship also stems from a more public domain known as “drama” in which reputations are negotiated and contested. Drama is a crux of social life (Goffman, 1986, 1990). Various functions can be ascribed to drama. We define *drama* as a cultural-behavioral system that has six components: (1) mechanisms of dispersal, (2) conventions as to what comprises a dramatic event, (3) dramatic behaviors and interactions,

(4) dramatic narratives, (5) dramatic performances, and (6) those with a reputation for drama, known as “drama queens.” One could argue that drama conveys, by negative example, important norms about romantic relationships, but this certainly does not explain its popularity. The dispersal component of drama is similar to that of gossip, but not all gossip is drama. Drama, although it is dispersed like gossip by word of mouth, is also performed before audiences. Dramatic behaviors and interactions, dramatic narratives, dramatic performances, and the role of the “drama queen” are all informed by an aesthetic that reflects conventions as to what comprises a dramatic event. The essential feature of a dramatic event is that it entails conflict, typically with one person becoming angry and attacking another person in some way. Any arena in which there are rules of conduct that can be broken has a potential for drama. “Drama queens” have a flair for becoming embroiled in conflict and generating dramatic events. But the “drama queen’s” skill goes beyond behavior. The “drama queen” is also a consummate storyteller who knows how to construct and perform dramatic narratives.

Relationships of any sort, since these are governed by rules, are good material for drama. Romantic relationships have rules of fidelity that can produce high emotion and retaliatory attacks. Infidelity is the most relished dramatic scenario. The agonistic property of romantic relationships that makes them entertaining is also an impediment to their survival. “Boys” assume there will be drama in almost any romantic relationship, and they go out of their way to discover it and pull this into the drama system. Facilitating or inciting infidelity within a couple, or breaking a couple apart with “trash talk,” may be motivated as much by a penchant for drama as by jealousy or attraction.

Romantic Relationships

Relationship Formation

A “boy” who “hooks up” with a male partner and embarks upon a relationship is susceptible to peer influence in a way similar to the “hooking up” of “straight” adolescents of the same age. The “boy” will want to know what other “boys” think about the partner. Do they consider him attractive? Has he been in relationships with other “boys” or have other “boys” had sex with him? If so, there is likely to be “trash talk” about the partner, information that he has been unfaithful, or perhaps that he is a lackluster sexual partner. A partner that comes from outside the group circle stands a better chance of seeming acceptable to a “boy” since the

group cannot generate plausible “trash talk” about him. Still, the group is likely to have opinions about the suitability of the partner for the “boy,” and will seek to undermine a relationship that does not meet the group’s conceptions of an appropriate couple. In addition to seeking group opinion about the partner, his past, and his suitability, the “boy” will actively process his own experiences and emotions with one or more close peers. The “boy” will look for mirroring from others as to how happy he appears, or will describe his feelings and seek the assessment of others as to whether he is really “in love.” He may compare his relationship to other relationships he is familiar with, which offer a standard of being “in love.” In general, especially if he is younger, he will rely on others to interpret his own experience. Whether or not the group knows the partner, there is likely to be some “trash talk” about the “boy,” the partner, and the relationship, a standard corrosive to relationship formation. The “boy” needs to assess such gossip and, if he does not accept it, to seek out and challenge the perpetrator. As the relationship progresses and gossip shifts to rumors of infidelity, the “boy” needs to be able to assess his partner’s behavior using personally trusted information sources. He will typically develop strategies of surveillance (Eyre, Auerswald, Hoffman, & Millstein, 1998).

Members of the group frequently display hostility toward romantic relationships and seek to undermine the relationship for reasons of envy, wanting sex or a relationship with one member of a couple, or wanting to harm one or both members of a couple. Thus peer influence is in general a force opposed to relationship formation and continuation. For this reason, those who attempt romantic relationships often feel obliged to sequester themselves from the Castro community to avoid destructive “trash talk” and the temptation of infidelity. Relationship-spoiling is hardly a phenomenon unique to the Castro or to gay youth; relationship-spoiling can be understood as an extension of heterosexual relationship dynamics common in high school settings (see Eyre, Bercovitch, & Ohlson, in review).

Being in Love

In spite of all obstacles, Castro “boys” definitely believe in love and distinguish “being in love” from lesser forms of romantic attainment. They seek out relationships in which they are “in love” with a partner and relish the memories of such relationships, however short-lived these may be. As one “boy” describes:

I've only been in love once and it was great because like I was really in love and like I did everything for him. I like gave him a hundred and one percent of me. . . . I never got tired of that person. Like I always had to see him at least once a day just to at least say, "Hi." Even though if we had nothing to talk about, just to be around that person. . . . just like hug him or . . . Just be together. . . . I wasn't interested in [anybody else]. Like I wouldn't even look at anybody.

The devotion inspired by love is the primary force that holds longer-term relationships together in the Castro, although love is typically unequal in relationships. One "boy" described a bond of love between two persons as a "glow":

They will have this feeling and they will both like, glow. They will just have this like, shine about each other; and they will both look at each other in certain ways. And they will both know that something is going on in their heads.

And the primary obstacle the lover in a Castro relationship must surmount regrettably comes with the territory of love. As the "boy" who has only been in love once describes: "I found out some stuff about myself. Like, I get jealous, and like—I never thought I was a jealous person. Maybe because I never really like loved anybody really."

The Fidelity Contract

Romantic relationships in the Castro involve a contract between partners similar to heterosexual romantic relationships in high school. The transition to being "boyfriends" involves an explicit or implicit agreement as to what is to be expected of each partner in the relationship. We term this agreement the *setup*. A core element of the setup is an expectation of sexual fidelity. But here is a problem: in the environment of the Castro, sexual norms entail having numerous partners. There is little support in the gay/bisexual youth community support for monogamous relationships. In fact there are added motivations to destroy romantic relationships, and inducing infidelity is a preferred strategy to accomplish this. Fidelity violations are the prime cause of romantic relationship breakup. Stories of these violations feed into the drama system where they generate substantial interest, given the conflict that infidelity pro-

vokes. Infidelity caused the demise of the relationship for the “boy” who has been in love only once. He relates:

He ended up being a jerk anyway. . . . He cheated on me with like a close friend of mine. You know, twice. And the first time, I found out because he told me. And then like I was so heartbroken and I was crying and then like he said—he said he was never going to it again and blah, blah, blah. And ‘cause I was in love or blinded by love or whatever, you know, I was like, “Okay. It’s fine” you know? And then he did it again and he wasn’t going to tell me, but my friend told me and then I was just like, “You know, dude, I can’t take this no more.” You know? And then like we decided to give each other space . . .

“Revenge Sex”

Jealousy frequently inspires vengeance and may lead to yet another instrumental strategy in which sex with a third party [Pawn] is used to slight [Target], a romantic partner who has cheated on [Aggressor]. This strategy is termed “revenge sex.” [Aggressor] chooses a venue of solicitation often frequented by [Target] or chooses a known [Pawn] such that the cheating partner will discover the liaison and presumably will become jealous himself:

It’s like they used to be lovers and then they separate . . . [but you know he still has] the hots for you. And so you brag to him about who you just fucked the other day, you know, or who you have been with. Then [he is] just sitting there like, well, “What the fuck? You have been fucking this person, this person, but not me?” . . . and that is another way of making people like, jealous, to an extent.

Although “revenge sex” is performed against a cheating or rejecting partner, its motivation in jealousy and its presumption that the other partner can be made to experience jealousy show that the emotions of the relationship are still alive. Nonetheless, “revenge sex” is at best likely to induce a new cycle of provocations rather than to bring the couple back together.

Sentimental Objects

We found that *sentimental objects* play an important role in Castro romantic relationships. The gift of a sentimental object such as a ring

signifies love and high hopes for a relationship. Ring exchange among gay/bisexual adolescents has obvious echoes of relationship confirmation in heterosexual relationships, including marriage, but also may suggest a re-scripting of romance in defiant and gay-affirmative terms. In one such gift of a ring, Don meets Michael and becomes “extremely interested” in him. “At first, we started to get to know each other a little bit then we messed around and ultimately we became boyfriends but for a short period of time.” The two promised that if either cheated on the other he would tell the other. Don also gave Michael a sentimental ring that had been given to him by his grandmother, whom he had been very close to. As the relationship progressed, quarrels arose because Michael flirted with other guys when Don was present, but would become upset if Don pointed out guys that he thought were cute. Don also felt there was an imbalance of affection. Eventually, in spite of strong feelings, Don broke up with Michael.

As Don explains, he gave Michael the ring “to show that, you know, that I really cared for him and this had a lot of sentimental value to me and I’m handing you the value, you know, to you to hold on to and to show that I like you.” But, when Don stopped the relationship, he did not take back his ring. He told Michael, “You can keep the ring because I still like you.” Leaving the sentimental ring with Michael was in some sense keeping the relationship alive, something that Michael understood. A few days after the breakup, Don reports:

[Michael] tells me he had sex with somebody, you know? And I was like, “Oh . . .” And he brought up the fact that like the guy he had sex with asked him, “Whose necklace?” Cause he had my ring on his necklace and he said, “Whose ring is that?” And he said, “Oh, it’s mine.” And that kind of hurt me that he didn’t even acknowledge my love for him or my affection for him.

In this example of revenge sex, the fact that Michael did not acknowledge the ring as a sentimental gift shows that the ring failed to establish Don’s claim on a relationship with Michael. Says Don, “I felt that he was really abusing that only as [an] accessory and not as any token of my feelings for him. So, I’m planning to get it back tomorrow . . .”

Balancing

As we have seen in the case of the sentimental object, the romantic setup extends beyond fidelity to a whole range of interactions in which

each partner constructs the value of the other partner through what we term *value-imparting gestures*. The relative worth of each participant is tied to these gestures. The history of exchange of gestures, weighed against the expectations of the setup, comprises the relationship *situation*. The ideal is *reciprocal balance*, in which the gestures of each partner equally affirm the worth of the other.

In the following example, we see how the ideal of reciprocal balance fails to be upheld in an exchange of sentimental objects. Alan and Dante have been in a relationship for a year and the two have lived together for seven months. Alan is in love with Dante but Dante has been having outside relationships, most recently with a partner named Tony. On their first anniversary, Dante decides to give Alan a ring. The ring was originally intended for Tony, but since Dante and Tony have been fighting Dante decided not to give it to him. Dante talks Alan into fitting the ring to his finger by telling him that he was planning to give it to yet another of his recent partners who has the same hand size as Alan. The ring Dante plans to give to Alan is thus originally intended for someone else. The scene of the ring giving is a baby-sitting session in which Alan, Dante, and a friend of Dante's have been drinking and smoking pot. After convincing Alan that he is not joking, Dante kneels on one knee before him and places the ring on Alan's left hand saying: "You've always been there for me through everything; you have lasted longer than my boy-friends. You're my best friend. You're my boo. I love you and happy anniversary."

The expression "boo" denotes a very close friend with whom one has a quasi-romantic relationship. Feeling that he should reciprocate, Alan then gives Dante a silver ring of considerable sentimental value that he has been saving "for the one I'm going to marry." Alan says: "You know, you're not supposed to get this ring because, you know, the guy I give this ring to is supposed to be the one I marry. . . . But you deserve it and I love you too, boo."

Dante's gift of a ring creates an expectation, or indeed an obligation for Alan to reciprocate. But since Dante's gesture of commitment is undercut by the history of the ring he gives, Alan is careful not to over-give in response to Dante's gesture. In the service of balance, Alan therefore undercuts his own gesture by making it clear that his ring is not intended for Dante. The undercutting signified in the exchange of rings is in fact paralleled by undercutting of love giving and commitment in the relationship. Dante gives Alan less love and commitment than would be expected from an actual boyfriend and Alan goes to some length to attenuate his giving of love and commitment to Dante in spite of the fact that he is in

love with Dante. What lies behind the principle of reciprocal balance apparent in this relationship? We believe that the crucial element is anxiety about being hurt given the devaluation of one party that occurs when an exchange is unbalanced.

A Dramatic Relationship

The following is an example of both principles of reciprocity and balance at work in a relationship. Long-lasting relationships are unusual in the Castro and tend to become an object of increasing attention if they endure. Such was the case with the relationship between Donald and Arthur, which had lasted almost a year by our second year of fieldwork. It seemed that everyone knew Donald and Arthur's story. Arthur had cheated on Donald nine times in the course of their relationship, and many felt Donald should break off the relationship. As Donald stated in an interview:

There's always the people who'll be like, "Well, I don't get it." I don't care how much you love someone. If they cheat on you and they keep on doing it, you'll just like leave 'em? But it wasn't all that easy and since he was young and hadn't had too many experiences with guys I kind of just hoped it would pass. I [found] out about the first time he cheated on me. I was pissed, you know, yelling and screaming at him. We talked about it and [I] told him I loved him. I asked him why he did it. "Well, I don't know." So I figured the little ho phase will pass and like each time I found out about something. It just—It got worse really. I was thinking, "Okay. This has to be the last time." And it was like three and four and five and six, seven, eight, nine . . . And I was just like, "Damn . . ." . . . I loved him so much for the simple fact that I knew that if he could stop cheating and playing little games and listening to all the lies and stuff, we could have like a near perfect relationship 'cause we had fun together and we had some pretty good things in common, so . . . Just all the other stuff aside, letting other people influence him to do things. We could have like a damn near perfect relationship.

Like Alan, discussed earlier, Donald was very strongly in love with his partner and was willing to overlook infidelity and hope for improvement, over and over again. Arthur, Donald's partner, was 17 and, by most accounts, very attractive. The two were of differing race-ethnicity. Arthur

was very feminine in manner and expected Donald to set the agenda when they went out and also to pay for things. Arthur was also the “bottom” in the relationship. Donald, in contrast, could easily be mistaken for “straight.” He was masculine and a “top.” People said that Arthur physically resembled other “boys” that Donald had dated.

At the time we conducted biographical interviews, the drama of Donald and Arthur had acquired a third player, another very feminine “boy” named Tommy. Tommy had once been a friend of Donald’s, but at the time we interviewed Donald he saw Tommy as a menace, threatening to lead Arthur astray and spoil Donald and Arthur’s relationship. Donald went away for a long weekend and lied to Arthur, saying he was going to Reno when in fact he was going to Las Vegas to visit a friend he was attracted to. He lied because he knew Arthur would not allow him to go to Las Vegas since Arthur knew of this friend and Donald’s attraction to him. This is an example of what we term *storing*. Storing is performing an insult but waiting until an opportune moment later to disclose it. It allows one always to be ready with an insult with which to retaliate. While Donald was away, Tommy persuaded Arthur to come with him to a gay prom. The two dressed in matching white tuxedos and had photographs taken together. The information about the prom was not disclosed to Donald on his return, another example of storing. When Donald told Arthur that he had really gone to Las Vegas, Arthur then arranged to spend most of his next birthday with Tommy while lying to Donald, saying that he was spending his birthday with his mother. When Donald found out, he was particularly hurt that Arthur did not choose to spend his birthday with him. After an argument, Arthur disclosed that he had gone with Tommy to the prom, showing him the pictures.

Tommy then decided to work on Donald and Arthur’s relationship from another angle. Donald’s friend from Las Vegas was visiting San Francisco and Donald wanted to go to the movies with him. Knowing that Arthur would not approve, Donald lied and said he was going to the movies with a “straight” friend. But Donald unwisely told his old friend Tommy about the deception. Tommy then not only passed the information on to Arthur but also actually hid in Arthur’s car when Arthur staked out the theater, catching Donald red-handed with his date. Tommy heard this all from the trunk of Arthur’s car. Angry, Donald disclosed to Arthur that he had almost had sex with a friend named Bill back when Arthur was being unfaithful. On a trip with Bill shortly after to Great America, an amusement park in the area, Arthur ordered a large Coke and poured it on Bill’s head in front of a number of friends and strangers. Donald then planned another trip to Las Vegas, again lying to Arthur that he was

going to L.A. This time, Donald had sex with his Las Vegas friend. States Donald:

It's just that I'm not going to take no shit anymore. It's not like I'm going to sit around here and cheat on him until I get to ten times or anything, but I'm not going to sit here and let myself be cheated on and lied to, hurt and all this other shit and just sit here and take it anymore. It's just like, you know, fuck it. If he does it, you know, I'm going to give it back to him, too. I'm not necessarily saying it's fair, but I'm just saying I just won't let myself be subject to that and, you know. So people say, "Well, why don't you just break up with him?" I said, "No." Nah. It's like I love him, but I won't let him run all over me.

How much of this negative exchange, culminating in Donald's renunciation of his own principles, would have occurred without Tommy's instigation? Tommy's story is in fact typical of relationship-spoiling, and comes with a typical motive. Although Tommy and Donald were once friends, it could have been much more. A year or so back, Tommy and Donald had been seeing each other when Tommy went off to camp for two weeks. Donald had wanted to talk to Tommy before he left to discuss the status of their relationship, but the talk never happened. While Tommy was away, Donald had sex with a couple of other Castro "boys," and the news quickly greeted Tommy on his return. The relationship was cut short.

Tommy had one of the primary motives for relationship-spoiling, envy of the relationship and desire for one of the partners. Tommy's role in this relationship illustrates how the community destabilizes romantic relationships. This relationship, which was on shaky grounds at the time we left the field, also illustrates how improbable monogamy is in this environment. There is no community support for it. Although highly coveted, these relationships thus have little chance to survive. The ongoing stories of Donald and Arthur, full of enmity and intrigue, are nonetheless of considerable interest to other Castro "boys." These provide an image of what romance is like.

DISCUSSION

One important comparison that can be drawn is that between our findings and reports of the dynamics of adult male same-sex couples.

McWhirter and Mattison (1984), for example, conducted in-depth interviews with 156 gay couples for a period of 5 years to discover what kept the couples together, the obstacles and benefits of being a male couple, and unique characteristics of male-male relationships. In comparing their findings to ours with Castro youth, perhaps the most striking contrast is that of length of relationship. During the first year of adult male-male relationships, characterized by McWhirter and Mattison by sexual and personal absorption and merging, most adolescent male-male relationships are over. Even a couple of months is considered a long time for a relationship to last by gay/bisexual adolescents in the Castro. Also, whereas adult male-male couples tend to move out of the spotlight of the gay scene, including bars and nighttime cruising ventures, most adolescent couples remain immersed in a sex-focused environment where infidelity looms as a threat to monogamous ideals. The choice adults are described as making between monogamy and non-monogamy (Marcus, 1999; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984; Sullivan, 2003) also appears absent among the adolescents, who appear always to assume a monogamy commitment and become distressed if it is not upheld.

Gay/bisexual male youth in the Castro engage in romantic relationships infrequently. Those who do are sometimes motivated by powerful feelings of love that may come into conflict with prevalent community attitudes. Researchers of gay/bisexual male youth have often identified heterosocial forces as key obstacles to gay youth relationship formation. Remafedi points to lack of “appropriate opportunities for peer dating and socialization” as a cause of eschewal of intimacy among gay male youth (Remafedi, 1990). Savin-Williams states that “Largely because of negative peer prohibitions and the lack of social support and recognition, same-sex romances that are initiated have difficulty flourishing” (Savin-Williams, 1996a). But our research in the Castro, a world set apart from heterosexual society, indicates that opportunities for peer dating and socialization may not be sufficient to enable sexual-minority youth to have romantic relationships. Our findings indicate that substantial peer prohibition and lack of social support and recognition can flourish *within* the sexual-minority youth community. A system of competition based on social capital derived from having sex with many attractive partners appears to inspire opposition to romantic bonding, as if romantic relationships posed a threat to this system and those invested in it (cf. Bourdieu, 1990).

One danger that those concerned with sexual-minority youth face is drawing an invidious comparison between sexual-minority youth and “normal” heterosexual adolescents. Pointing to heterosexually enforced

constraints as preventing sexual-minority youth from having a “normal” adolescent experience may inadvertently hold up heterosexual adolescence as an ideal in comparison to which sexual-minority youth are seen as lacking. We have conducted research focused on sexual and romantic relationships in Oakland high schools with a similar ethnic makeup to that of the sexual-minority population in the Castro. Key elements of the Castro gay youth scene, such as a male prestige system based on having sex with many attractive partners and institutionalized relationship-spoiling (termed “hating”), in which adolescents provoke infidelity or spread false rumors in order to break apart romantic couples, are also prominent features of the heterosexual social environment of the Oakland high schools we have studied. Castro gay youth have had far greater exposure to heterosexual culture surrounding romantic relationships, which is learned in high school, than they have had exposure to the culture surrounding romantic relationships in the adult gay community. In other words, gay youth may have a problem engaging in romantic experiences that are too similar to those of heterosexual adolescents, and not conducive to successful romantic relationships.

The model of a committed but non-monogamous relationship which is endorsed and followed by many adult gay men (Marcus, 1999; McWhirter & Mattison, 1984; Sullivan, 2003) appears to be resisted by Castro youth. The two-category system of “monogamous” and “non-monogamous” relationships set forth by Kurdek and Schmitt (1985) in a study of adult gay men would need a third category of *failing monogamous* relationships if it were to be applied to either sexual minority or heterosexual adolescents. Relationships that have started with a commitment to monogamy but have since been troubled by the prohibited infidelity of one or both partners may be a larger category than either the “monogamous” or the “non-monogamous” category of relationship. Although the role of infidelity in the course of romantic relationships of adolescents has not been widely studied, a small literature dealing with sexual betrayal in the romantic relationships of white heterosexual late adolescents indicates that adolescent infidelity in committed relationships is not uncommon in this group as well, occurring in 20% to 64% of these heterosexual relationships, depending on how infidelity is defined (Feldman & Cauffman, 1999a, 1999b; Graber, Britto, & Brooks-Gunn, 1999). Infidelity may constitute a normative part of adolescent romantic relationships and play an important role in the institution of serial monogamy, where adolescents periodically break off romantic relationships as a prelude to initiating new ones.

In conclusion, let us review the interplay of the thinking and experience of romantic partners and the thinking and experience of other members of the gay/bisexual youth community that our study has reported. Motivated by love, a couple strives for monogamy, which has the potential to exempt both partners from the system of prestige sex that otherwise defines the community. The romantic relationship is indeed an alternative social system, defined in terms of balanced reciprocity between two partners rather than competition for prestige between members of a group. Sharing many of the same understandings about romance as the romantic practitioners, members of the larger community seek to instigate betrayal in the romantic dyad either by seducing one of the romantic partners or by conveying rumors of betrayal in hope of inspiring one romantic partner to break monogamy by performing revenge sex directed at the other partner. In either case, the effect is to break up the romantic couple as well as to convey an image of romance as painful and unstable. Only true sequestering, with all of its attending social losses, appears to offer protection. To understand this opposition between romantic coupling and male adolescent prestige-sex-based communal life will require the study of more cases than just the Castro, for it is probable that this opposition between prestige and romance is not solely a male gay/bisexual adolescent phenomenon. It is only through further research that can penetrate adolescent worlds which thrive at the periphery of adult supervision that we may find explanations of this and related adolescent sexual/romantic phenomena.

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