

# Circuits of power, circuits of pleasure: Sexual scripting in gay men's bottom narratives

**Trevor Hoppe**

University of Michigan, USA

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## Abstract

This article explores the meanings 18 HIV-negative gay male participants in San Francisco attributed to their positional identity as 'bottoms'. In particular, I analyze two dominant, mutually constitutive sets of sexual scripts participants invoked in their bottom narratives: first, that bottoms are men who desire to produce pleasure for their partners; and second, that bottoms are men who desire to submit sexually to their partners. I argue that these scripted conceptions both give possibility to and constrain the ways in which participants interpret and experience their sexual practices and desires. I conclude by examining how these scripts operate as structured social phenomena that shape the ways in which participants are able to navigate scenarios in which these scripts conflict directly with 'safer sex' scripts, potentially resulting in what I term 'pleasure/risk dilemmas'.

## Keywords

gay men, HIV risk, sexual identity, sexual scripts, structuration

**Bottom** noun: 1. the buttocks . . . 2. a gay man who prefers to be the passive partner during anal intercourse. See **passive**. 3. a submissive person during sado-masochistic or bondage and domination roleplay.

(Baker, 2002: 87)

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## Corresponding author:

Trevor Hoppe, Department of Sociology, Women's Studies, and Public Health, University of Michigan, 500 South State, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1382, USA

Email: [thoppe@umich.edu](mailto:thoppe@umich.edu)

## Introduction

Many gay men identify as ‘top’ or ‘bottom’ (or ‘versatile’), a practice generally thought to reflect their preferences for insertive or receptive anal intercourse (or both). As evidenced in the foregoing definition provided by British linguist Paul Baker, the use of the term ‘bottom’ in western gay cultures tends to refer to either: (1) a person preferring receptive anal intercourse; or, (2) the submissive partner in sado-masochist (S&M) or bondage and domination (B&D) roleplay. Beyond linguistic accounts, however, very little social science scholarship exists that interrogates how gay men understand their ‘positional identities’. While studies have previously described this practice as ‘sexual self-label’ (Hart et al., 2003; Wegesin and Meyer-Bahlburg, 2000), I argue that these categories are imbued with meanings that go beyond a mere preference for insertive or receptive anal intercourse. Rather, these terms serve as relational reference points for men’s intimate lives, informing how both they and their partners make meaning of their desires and sexual practices. This article explores the ways in which 18 HIV-negative self-identified gay male bottoms in San Francisco narrate their bottom identities as ‘scripted’ in terms of particular conceptions of power and pleasure.

Two dominant sets of ‘sexual scripts’ emerged from the interview and focus group data – one concerning relational pleasure and one concerning relational power. Drawing on Anthony Giddens’s (1986) and William Sewell’s (1992) theoretical works on ‘structuration’ – the dynamic processes by which social structures are socially reconstituted by social actors – I argue that these two, often overlapping and mutually constitutive sets of scripts both give possibility to and constrain the ways in which participants narrate their sexual interactions, practices and desires. In other words, while the men in this study certainly had ‘agency’ in the ways they experienced and (re)interpreted socio-cultural scripts about bottoms, these subjective interpretations are always already situated within a social world in which certain dominant modes of understanding operate. Moreover, I argue that participants’ scripted understandings of their identities as bottoms – vis-à-vis these scripted conceptions of power and pleasure – serve to *position* them in particular ways to their socio-sexual words. As Giddens argued:

Fundamental to social life is the positioning of the body in social encounters. ‘Positioning’ here is a rich term. The body is positioned in the immediate circumstances of co-presence in relation to others... Positioning is, however, also to be understood in relation to the seriality of encounters across time-space. Each person is positioned, in a ‘multiple’ way, within social relations conferred by specific social identities; this is the main sphere of application of the concept of social role. (Giddens, 1986: xxiv)

In describing top, bottom, and versatile identities collectively as ‘positional identity’, I am playing on a double meaning of the term ‘positional’ – first, as a reference to this concept of positionality provided by Giddens; and second, as a

reference to the tongue-in-cheek practice among gay men to refer to ‘top’ or ‘bottom’ as a ‘position’ one plays in sports (e.g. ‘pitcher or catcher’?<sup>1</sup>). While the latter is indeed often used to provoke humor, I would argue that the opposition of ‘pitcher’ and ‘catcher’ signals that these categories are intended to refer to more than just different behavioral predilections, but also different strategies for success and rules of play.

In this article, I will argue that two dominant sets of scripts about pleasure and power work together to produce participants’ conceptions of a bottom’s positionality – the particularities of which vary at the level of the individual, but are consistent in that they are all in some way in conversation with these dominant sets. In this way, this article can be read as an attempt to find a kind of middle ground in the polarizing debates over structure and agency that have characterized HIV prevention discourse. In the literature on gay men’s sexualities, for instance, research has been primarily interested in explicating their (ir)rational decisions to engage in ‘high risk’ sexual practices. This scholarship is primarily produced within the field of Public Health, a field whose methodologies and epistemologies tend to emphasize an individual’s agentic ability to make rational decisions aimed at promoting their health – at the expense of social context (Peterson and Lupton, 1996). This paradigmatic limitation was unintentionally exacerbated by public health’s early (though necessary and productive) abandonment of identity categories like ‘gay’ as sites of inquiry, in favor of acultural, behavioral categories such as ‘men who have sex with men’ or MSM (Young and Meyer, 2005).

In particular, many studies have examined gay men’s decisions to engage in anal sex without condoms because these practices are considered ‘high risk’ for HIV acquisition (Vittinghoff et al., 1999). As such, researchers have relied on a number of psychological measures of ‘well-being’ to explain ‘why’ men engage in these practices. As social theorist David Halperin argues:

The result is to portray gay men as beset by a number of serious psychological conditions, ranging (on the ‘victim’ end of the scale) from internalized homophobia, survivor guilt, and post-traumatic stress disorder to (on the pathological end) low-self-esteem, addictive personality syndrome, sexual compulsiveness, and lack of self-control. (Halperin, 2007: 12)

For instance, despite the positional risk differential between insertive and receptive anal intercourse, researchers have tended to lump these behaviors together in the category of ‘barebacking’, a hotly contentious category that has been the subject of ample quantitative studies aimed at documenting its prevalence and potential psychological roots (see for example Elford et al., 2000; Halkitis, 2003; Valleroy et al., 2000; van de Ven et al., 1998; Warren et al., 2008), and a growing qualitative literature examining men’s desires and phenomenological experiences of this practice (Ridge, 2004; Sheon and Crosby, 2004). Research investigating social factors influencing risky practices has primarily investigated how these factors influence men’s rational decision-making processes (see Suarez and Miller, 2001,

for a review). Attempts to examine socio-cultural factors that contextualize and shape men's 'risky' practices (what I refer to in this article as 'structuration') have been limited, but include the differentiated cultural rules of engagement in 'bare-back' sex subcultures (Adam et al., 2008) and sexual status orders organized around race and class (Green, 2008).

In this article, I argue that participants' sexually scripted conceptions of their positional identity as bottoms both give possibility to and constrain the way men experience, understand, and practice sex. Notably, I focus almost exclusively here on sexual practice and meaning. This should not be read as foreclosing the possibility that there could be extrasexual qualities of bottom identity (indeed, there are indications that bottoms are culturally constructed as generally indecisive, 'bitchy', and/or socially submissive), but that is not the focus of this study. Moreover, this article can be read as an opportunity for 'thinking sex', as proposed by Gayle Rubin in her now-famous essay (Rubin, 1984). This does not mean that other, equally important cultural forms – notably, gender – are not at work. Rather, this article is an effort in analyzing these men's narratives primarily through the lens of sex without relying on gender to have already explained bottom positionality often assumed to be 'passive' and thus 'feminine'.

In this essay, I will explore how men in this study narrated their bottom identities in terms of two dominant sets of sexual scripts: (1) bottoms as those who desire to produce pleasure; and (2) bottoms as those who desire to submit sexually. Throughout the piece, I rely on the metaphor of a 'circuit' to elucidate the imagined pathways by which participants conceive of pleasure and power as flowing (see the 'feels pleasure by giving pleasure' section), and also to help explain how certain scripts can operate as a circuit maker-or-breaker (see the 'good boy' section). I conclude by arguing that particular alignments of these scripts can operate as a form of social structure that could potentially facilitate or hinder men's efforts to navigate sexual risk scenarios. Building on the microsociological approach for understanding HIV risk, as pioneered by Fontdevila (2009), I argue that participants faced what I term 'pleasure/risk dilemmas'.

## **Existing scholarship on positional identity**

Few studies have interrogated the potential ways that men's positional identities may structure the way they experience and understand their sexual behaviors. Outside of New York and San Francisco, very little is even known about how many men identify with these categories. The few studies that do exist on these categories have tended to rely on quantitative methodologies that take these categories' meanings for granted.

Wegesin and Meyer-Bahlburg's (2000) study of gay men in New York City suggests that, although many men in their sample reported self-identifying as top, bottom, or versatile, these identities did not perfectly 'correlate' with their behavior. For instance, 38.9 per cent of bottom-identified participants reported engaging in insertive anal intercourse at least once in the previous six months (versus 63.6% of tops), while 22.7 per cent of top-identified participants reported

engaging in receptive anal intercourse (versus 77.8% of bottoms). Similarly, a study involving a more racially diverse sample of HIV-positive men who have sex with men in New York and San Francisco revealed that 41.4 per cent of top-identified participants reported engaging in receptive anal intercourse, while 39.4 per cent of bottom-identified participants reported engaging in insertive anal intercourse (Hart et al., 2003). These findings suggest that bottom-identified men may be more likely to engage in both insertive and receptive anal intercourse, as compared with tops, pointing to a particular slippage between how the term 'bottom' has been traditionally defined (one who practices receptive anal intercourse), and the way it actually operates in practice.

## Methods

I recruited 18 self-identified HIV-negative gay male bottoms using advertisements posted on the online web community 'Craigslist' during the summer of 2008. Participants attended a three to five-person focus group and – approximately two weeks later – a follow-up one-on-one interview. In both sessions, participants were asked to discuss a range of topics, including their sexual identities and experiences, their relationship with a broadly defined gay culture, and their experiences with HIV and risk. At the beginning of each of the five focus group sessions, I asked participants to fill out a nametag using a pseudonym of their choosing, which are also the names used in this article. I coded interview and focus group transcripts according to the guidelines of 'grounded theory' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), an approach that highlights the participant's subjective perspectives. The 18 participants who were recruited ranged in age from 27 to 66. Two participants declined to state their age, 13 (72%) were Caucasian; 3 were Latino (17%); and 2 (11%) were Asian-Pacific Islander.

I chose to combine focus groups and one-on-one interviews for several reasons. Focus groups allow the researcher to observe interactions between participants, particularly their reactions to the opinions of others. I encouraged participants during the focus group to ask follow-up questions of other participants, or of me, at any point, either to help clarify or follow up on something said – what some methodologists have called a 'synergistic group effect' (Stuart and Shamdasani, 1990; Sussman, et al., 1991). Interviews, on the other hand, allow for more in-depth investigations of an individual participant's experiences (Berg, 1989). In this way, focus groups can be seen as particularly useful for understanding cultural and interpersonal scripts in the form of emergent group norms, while interviews allow for a more in-depth account of 'biographical' intrapsychic and interpersonal scripts.

## Sexual scripting theory and structuration

John Gagnon and William Simon's theory of sexual scripting argues that sexual interactions can be understood to be informed by sexual 'scripts' or schemas that frame the way people make sense of and experience sexual interactions

(Gagnon, 2004 [1991]). These scripts operate on three related, but distinct levels (Laumann and Gagnon, 1995): the intrapsychic (within the individual); the interpersonal (between individuals); and cultural (constructed socially at a cultural level). Because of its inclusion of the cultural and intrapsychic levels, this approach has advantages over another common approach in the literature on identity development – symbolic interactionism – which primarily focuses on the level of social interaction. Sexual scripting as an analytic approach goes beyond examining the ways in which meaning is produced through social interaction by allowing for meaning to be also constituted at the level of culture and at the level of the individual.

In this article, I will focus on two overlapping sets of scripts that inform participants' understandings of their positional identity as a bottom, both of which can be understood as operating at different points in their narratives on all three levels outlined earlier. While this study's primary contribution is not intended to be theoretical, I am attempting here to marry two theoretical frameworks that may not at first appear to be compatible. By saying here that I understand sexual scripts as a form of structuration, I am comparing these scripts to what Giddens called 'rules' and what Sewell later reformulated as 'schema'. As Sewell explains, these concepts are linked to French structuralism's distinction between *langue* and *parole*:

Giddens's notion of rules is largely derived from French structuralism... He relies heavily on a typically structuralist analogy with Saussurian linguistics. Giddens likens his own distinction between structure and practice to the Saussurian distinction between *langue* and *parole*. According to this analogy, structure is to practice as *langue* (the abstract rules that make possible the production of grammatical sentences) is to *parole* (speech, or the production of actual sentences; 1976, pp. 118–22). Hence structure, like *langue*, is a complex of rules with a 'virtual' existence, while practice, like speech, is an enactment of these rules in space and time. For a French structuralist, structure is the complex of such rules. (Sewell, 1992: 6)

For a bottom, I am arguing here that the set of scripts described in this article operate as schema by giving meaning to these men's sexual practices. Sewell argues as I am here that schema operate as a kind of 'virtual'<sup>2</sup> social structure in that they are largely intangible and taken for granted. Thus, I argue that these three levels of sexual scripts – psychological, interpersonal, and cultural – are all examples of this kind of virtual social structure that shape how men in my study interpret and experience sex.

The scripts described in this article are not distributed evenly, nor are they always interpreted in the same way. For instance, while most of the scripts documented here reflect points of coherence in the linguistic tools men rely on to narrate their desires and practices, in one section I point to a set of 'anal orgasm' scripts that – while superficially seeming to describe a similar phenomenon – upon closer inspection are revealed to lack coherence as a collective framework for a bottom's orgasm. By highlighting the silences and ambiguities that exist alongside more

concretely scripted phenomena, I hope to avoid being read as constructing the ‘bottom’ category as overly determined or monolithic.

### **‘Feels pleasure by giving pleasure’: Relational pleasure and bottom identity**

I think a bottom is – in a sexual contact – the bottom is the person who feels pleasure by giving pleasure. And I think the top feels pleasure by feeling pleasure. So I know that there are distinctions, at least in the gay community, about ‘oral bottom’, ‘anal bottom’. I don’t necessarily know that, like, whose body part gets inserted where, I don’t think that that’s the defining characteristic. When I think about the physicality of a heterosexual act, sure that makes sense. You know, that the bottom would be the receiving . . . insertion of penis. You know, if it’s going to go to like, ‘Insert Tab A into Spot B’, that kind of thing. But, I think, more for me, it’s kind of like the mental or the emotional, psychological experience of providing pleasure for someone else. (Paul, interview)

As evidenced in this quotation from Paul – a 37 year-old Asian-American participant from New York – many participants described being a bottom as ‘the person who feels pleasure by giving pleasure’, or in words to that effect, indicating that pleasure for bottoms ‘originates’ in their top-identified partners and is only experienced by bottoms when they perceive their partners’ pleasure. In this section, I examine these narratives and argue that implicit in them is a theory of pleasure that is relational and circuitous – relational in the sense that it is dependent on their partners, and circuitous in that it is described (to varying degrees) as flowing in a particular fashion.

In the foregoing quotation, Paul is explicitly arguing that being a bottom is *not* about particular body parts being inserted or received in particular orifices. He notes the use of ‘oral bottom’ and ‘anal bottom’ to distinguish between those who enjoy performing oral sex on their partners, on the one hand, and those who enjoy receptive anal intercourse, on the other. In this way, he is pointing to the ways that ‘bottom’ is not only linguistically constructed (or culturally scripted) to allow for body-location indicators (‘anal’, ‘oral’) to modify the word ‘bottom’ (e.g. ‘oral bottom’), but also how it is broken down into additional subcategories. Nonetheless, for Paul, the term ‘bottom’ can be separated from body-location indicators: it is not simply a shorthand for someone who prefers receptive anal intercourse, but rather an expression of his desire for producing pleasure in his sexual partners. Dan, a 58-year-old white participant from Maryland, argues similarly:

Or it could also be that the . . . the thing that distinguishes being a bottom is that you get your pleasure from getting someone else off. It’s not just – you know, you

[speaking to another participant] were saying ‘Well I want what I want and he wants what he wants’. But it also might be that what I want is . . . watching you get off, or helping you get off. (Dan, focus group)

Many participants described a bottom’s pleasure as more psychological in nature than physiologically embodied. For instance, David, a 45-year-old white participant from Pennsylvania, differentiates between what a potential sexual experience as a bottom might ‘feel like’ (e.g. embodied sensations) and what it might ‘be like’ (e.g. mental or contextual interpretation):

Even tops can enjoy the physical feeling of having something happen around your butt. There’s lots of nerves down there. But I’m talking about something else, I’m talking about just a drive for pleasing a man. When I see somebody who really gets me going, I don’t think, ‘What would I like to happen in my ass?’ You know? . . . I think of him on top of me, sweating, grunting, and just having a rocking good time, with me on my back . . . But, what I’m thinking of isn’t what it would *feel* like, I’m thinking what it would *be* like. You know, the whole experience, not just the sensation. (David, interview)

In this way, pleasure for David and Paul is something that is enacted relationally and at a kind of eroticized ‘psychological’ level beyond the mere embodied sensations of nerve endings. When David fantasizes about what sex with a potential sexual partner might ‘be like’, he highlights his partner ‘having a rocking good time’ – but not necessarily David’s own enjoyment. This is because, for David and many other participants, their partner’s pleasure is the very measure for their own pleasure. When their partner has a ‘rocking good time’, pleasure can flow along the circuit. In this conception of pleasure, it is only by providing pleasure to his partner that a bottom himself experiences pleasure. Thus, based on this conceptualization, if his partner never experienced pleasure in the first place, neither would the bottom – the circuit would be broken.

Paul’s focus on producing pleasure as a primary component of the definition of ‘bottom’ was not necessarily consistent across the variety of working definitions participants gave for the term. Many participants believed that, in fact, identifying as a bottom was primarily a reflection of their preference for receptive anal intercourse. However, Paul’s understanding of bottoms-as-pleasure-producers is confirmed by an analysis of several other narratives. Because of this, I will use Paul’s definition as a conceptual framework for the analysis that follows of the scripts embedded in participants’ narratives of their sexual practices, norms, and desires.

### ‘Good boy’

Several participants reported primarily experiencing pleasure in having their efforts to pleasure their partners acknowledged approvingly. For instance, when



discussing what makes for great sex, Stanley – a white participant from the Midwest who did not disclose his age – notes that he likes his partners ‘to be enthusiastic. Just be visibly enjoying themselves and then I enjoy myself’ (Stanley, focus group). For Stanley, being able ‘visibly’ to register that his partners were ‘enjoying themselves’ was the key to his own enjoyment. The chronology (‘then I enjoy myself’) is key here: his partner’s pleasure is seen as *preceding* his own.

This need for partners to indicate their experienced pleasure was more clearly expressed by Nelson, a 43-year-old white gay man from Texas who self-identifies as a ‘collared boy’. In a literal sense, this means that he wears a leather collar around his neck at all times; symbolically, it signifies his status as submissive in his relationship with his primary partner. It is his partners’ validation of his efforts to please them by telling him he’s a ‘good boy’ that ‘turns his crank’:

My *major* point of getting my crank turned is when the top reaches down, pats my head, and tells me that I’m a good boy or that I did a good job. I...Oooh...that’s...you know, screw everything else, that’s what I’m in for! (Nelson, interview)

In Nelson’s conception of being a bottom, being a ‘good boy’ means succeeding in providing pleasure to your partner. For him, the ‘function’ (in his words) of the bottom is to provide tops with pleasure – and knowing that the top was enjoying his efforts was crucial for his own enjoyment of a particular encounter. For example, in recounting a story of a sexual encounter in a sex club in Los Angeles, he points to his partner’s silence as a barrier to his own enjoyment:

[I] had gone out to one of the sex clubs there...*really* hot guy...putting out major dom stuff, wanted to just be *completely* serviced, I was like...‘Okay. I think I can get my head around this’. And I started playing with him and...*nothing*. No feedback whatsoever. I mean, he was staying *hard*. And it was one of those things, ‘Sorry, you need to give me just a little smidgen of something to indicate that I’m involved in this process’. (Nelson, interview)

We can understand his story here as a kind of interpersonal sexual script breakdown. He points to his partner’s erection as a sign that he was probably enjoying the experience, but without any verbal validation from him there was no potential for him to find pleasure in the encounter. In this sense, Nelson’s ‘good boy’ pleasure script operates as a kind of circuit-maker, connecting the two partners and allowing for pleasure to flow between them. Absent this key component, the pleasure circuit collapses.

He remembers later recounting this scenario to a friend of his to ‘compare notes’ (a form of script validation and generation), when he realized the importance of

that validation:

So I was thinking about it after it happened, and I have a wonderful friend down there, we discuss our comparative kinks a lot. And it was like, even the guys who give *very* very thin, faint praise, in a way, that's kind of hot. Because I know that when I get a 'Good boy' from them, I worked for it, and they *mean it*. And it's like, 'Oh, *yeah!*' [laughs] 'That works! I'll work for some more of that'. (Nelson, interview)

Nelson understood his role as a bottom as first and foremost about pleasuring his partners. But more than just a unidirectional flow, pleasure for Nelson becomes circuitous when his partner tells him he's a 'good boy', which sets the flow into motion.

### *Anal orgasm*

Not all experiences described by bottoms in this study were as clearly scripted as Nelson's use of 'good boy', however. Notably, while most participants believed that a bottom's orgasm was different from a top's, the particular ways in which they described that difference varied dramatically. For example, several participants expressed a general lack of interest in externally stimulated ejaculation (the traditional conception of male orgasm), while highlighting the ecstasy and sense of accomplishment found in the 'anal orgasm' – a variegated concept that differed from participant to participant. For some, this implied a 'hands-free' orgasm during receptive anal sex. During a focus group session, Paul and David exchanged ideas on this topic:

David: Have you ever come while someone's fucking you without jerking off?

Paul: Yeah, yeah.

David: That's a mind-blowing experience.

Paul: See, but not for me. Because for me, it's like... I don't have to come. I have a very different kind of orgasm from being a bottom, from being fucked. Something doesn't have to come out of my penis.

David: Yeah, for me I can have a completely satisfying experience, but if they make me come without jerking off, they own me (laughter). That's it! I will sign over the house.

Several things are happening here. First, there is a special status David attributes to 'hands-free' orgasms. He even goes so far as to say that if his partners make him come without masturbation they 'own' him and that he would 'sign over the house'. While clearly tongue-in-cheek, his comments express a sense of gratitude

for the fulfillment of a rare but highly valued outcome. Further, both Paul and David are indicating that a bottom's primary source of pleasure is not produced by stimulating their external genitals – rather, it produced by being penetrated by their partners.<sup>3</sup>

Second, both Paul and David are pointing to the potential for a 'completely satisfying experience' in the absence of ejaculation. Providing yet another conception of the 'anal orgasm', Paul notes that he has 'a very different kind of orgasm' – one that doesn't result in ejaculation (a 'mental orgasm'). Paul even goes so far as to differentiate tops from bottoms by their desire for seminal ejaculation:

So I think, in my mind, the top is the person who wants to 'get off', you know, the guy who says 'I wanna cum. I wanna shoot. I wanna . . . ejaculate'. Or they equate ejaculation with orgasm. And to me, like, being a bottom, I'm less concerned about that than someone else might be. (Paul, interview)

Describing the orgasmic experience for bottoms proved to be difficult for many participants. In his 'coming out' narrative as a bottom, Drew – a participant from the East Coast who declined to state his age – relates the significance of having an 'anal orgasm' as central to his transition from top to bottom in an early relationship:

I started out being a top in the relationship, and then I changed over to being a bottom, because I started to like . . . like, I had an anal orgasm or something like that. I don't know if that's how they classify it from a clinical standpoint, but that's how I felt. And, so you know, that's what I prefer sexually. (Drew, focus group)

In this quotation, we can see Drew groping around for language to describe his experience of pleasure as a bottom, looking to medical discourses (or scripts) for explanations. Yet, because they are describing their sexual pleasure as not primarily the result of penile stimulation, the traditional biomedical language of discharges and penile contractions fails to inform their orgasmic experiences. This is undoubtedly complicated by the variety of these experiences described. Paul defines it as a 'mental orgasm', or a kind of pleasure-response he defines as 'emotional, psychological' rather than purely physiological, while David is more obviously referring to an embodied, physiological response of ejaculating 'while someone's fucking you without jerking off'. Drew's reference to his experience of an 'anal orgasm' is more ambiguous. Thus, we can view these descriptions as similar in that they are all attempting to describe their experience of 'orgasm', yet they all seem to be using similar vocabulary to attempt to describe disparate kinds of phenomena.

But while their models for a bottom's orgasm vary phenomenologically, their descriptions overlap in the way they understand their orgasms to be relationally dependent on their partner's actions. Whether it is the result of their partner's stimulation of their prostate organ, or from the psychological satisfaction of

pleasuring their partners, both conceptions of a bottom's orgasm are – at the core – relationally dependent.

### *'Using you as a cumdump'*

A minority of participants expressed being 'used' for their partner's pleasure as the ultimate fantasy in their sexual lives. In the previous sections, the participant's partner's interest or lack of interest in the bottom's pleasure was not seen as critical to the participant's enjoyment of a particular sexual encounter. That is to say, the bottom's pleasure was not directly part of the script, even if it was the outcome. However, for Brian – a 38-year-old Brazilian-born American – the 'hottest' sexual encounters were those in which their own pleasure was regarded as more or less inconsequential:

Like, the guy just . . . he doesn't care anything about you but your hole. All he wants is just to fuck you, dump his load and then leave. So, to me, that whole scene excited me a lot. You know, just pretty much using you as a cumdump, just fuck you and whatever . . . and leave. (Brian, interview)

We can understand this fantasy described here by Brian as a set of interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts that he sought to enact in his sexual encounters – a set of scripts that he saw as connected to a particular sexual 'scene'. This fantasy takes the relational pleasure scripts for bottoms outlined previously to their extreme: it is only the top's pleasure that matters.

For Brian, the pleasure circuit begins and ends in the top – at least according to the scripts. That is, while he obviously finds great pleasure in these encounters, the 'cumdump' scripts do not place value on that outcome. The pleasure in Brian's fantasy comes not from being viewed as a subject with pleasures that need fulfilling, but as an object whose body is at the disposal of others. Whereas the pleasure for bottoms in previous sections was scripted as a valued outcome ('anal orgasm'; the experience of hearing 'good boy'), in Brian's fantasy of being 'used as a cumdump', the bottom's pleasure is achieved by being disregarded and objectified. Examining the way that seminal fluid exchange is encoded with meaning here helps explicate Brian's pleasure.

### *'A craving for sperm'*

Many participants viewed seminal fluid exchange as an important symbolic exchange of pleasure from top to bottom. The pleasure for Brian seemed to emerge from a kind of erotic satisfaction from knowing he had succeeded in making his partner orgasm, and that the physical product of that orgasmic experience was now literally inside him. Because semen seems to represent pure, embodied pleasure for Brian, having it physically 'dumped' inside him was both a literal and metaphorical exchange. Similarly, when I asked if he 'had anything else to

say about bottoming’, David describes being a bottom as about his ‘craving for sperm’:

It’s almost like the craving for sperm, you know? It’s just, like, it’s literally a craving. It’s like, ‘I want that’ and I can only get that from a man and I want it from another man. There’s something wrapped up in there. (David, interview)

Semen, in this way, is loaded with erotic meanings that have obvious implications for men’s sexual health.

The desire and meanings associated with semen – in particular in relation to the practice of ‘breeding’, or ejaculating inside the rectum without a condom – have begun to be documented among western gay men (see Reynolds, 2007; Schilder, 2008), but questions remain over the ‘origins’ of such desires. With this problematic in mind, it is important here to examine Brian’s reference to ‘that whole scene’, which suggests a (sub)cultural production of fantasy scripts. Brian traces this interplay between his development of his own intrapsychic sexual scripts and their concomitant development socially via online sex cultures through a series of online hookups. His story begins with a hookup many years ago, the result of his first post on Craigslist that sought someone to come over and find him naked, blindfolded, and on his knees:

Today, 50% of those [online ads] are something about the blindfold or whatever. But back, like I remember when I first posted something like that, I was one of the first ones to do that kind of scene. And then it started being so often. I [even noticed guys using the same] format of my ads over and over and over. But anyways, about this guy . . . just walked in and I was on my knees, naked, blindfolded. And the whole thing was just so exciting, so hot . . . it was like one of the best sex I have ever had. That was my very first [experience like that] . . . And I think this had [a] very big impact on the good side. And it made me want more. And then not long after that, I met this guy online . . . It was totally anonymous, he would just call me or e-mail me, like ‘Hey I’m stopping by. I’ll drop a load’. There wasn’t any conversation . . . I should be ashamed to say this, but like, the whole thing was really exciting to me. So that’s pretty much how I ended up on that path. And now I kind of enjoy it, I really do. (Brian, interview)

Here we see Brian tracing the lineage (or ‘path’, as he describes it) of the fantasy outlined at the start of this section. Clearly, he sees himself as a pioneer in developing this kind of anonymous sex scene, pointing to his own early public expression of his intrapsychic and interpersonal scripts about anonymity and objectification and their subsequent use in other men’s Craigslist ads ‘over and over and over’. Thus, he is suggesting that websites like Craigslist provide one pathway for individual men’s intrapsychic scripts to become public fodder for cultural (re)production. For Brian, it is an account of how a few exciting experiences led to the development and dissemination of a particular set of sexual scripts about bottoms.

Brian's narrative of being regarded as an object for use in the interest of his partner's pleasure raises questions of how power and pleasure are intertwined in these sexual scripts about bottom identity. If these men understand their own pleasure as relationally dependent on that of their partners', how do they interpret sexual power relations? I explore this question in the next section.

### **'Willing to submit': Relational power and bottom identity**

The related and similarly prevalent set of sexual scripts invoked by participants revolved around men's conceptions of power. While the particularities of these scripts varied at the cultural, social, and individual level, it was evident that men's conceptions of their relation to power as bottoms was constituted through their relations to pleasure. That is to say, the two sets of scripts are mutually constitutive. For instance, Diego – a 49-year-old Mexican-born American from Southern California – reported a complex relationship to receptive anal intercourse because he was raped at an early age by a family member – a report consistent with data showing higher prevalence of childhood sexual abuse among Latino MSM versus non-Latino MSM (Arreola et al., 2005). He believed that it was this childhood traumatic experience that made it difficult until recently for him to explore receptive anal intercourse:

To me, it's just someone who enjoys being the recipient – you know, the bottom so to speak. Some people would equate it to the woman, and it's just . . . basically it's someone that is . . . willing to submit . . . their body and give up control of their body to derive pleasure from somebody else's pleasure. (Diego, interview)

Diego's conception of bottom identity is deeply imbued with a conception of power transfer: he understands himself as temporarily handing over control of his body to his partners *as a means for pleasure production*. A bottom, in Diego's conception, is someone willing to submit in order to 'derive pleasure from somebody else's pleasure'. Allowing his partner to penetrate him was synonymous to giving up full control of his body to his partners and to emasculation, requiring a great deal of trust. In his narrative, it is clear that his conception of bottom identity is influenced by the fact that his first experience with receptive anal sex was marked by such a lack of control.

However, while many men reported feeling that being a bottom meant abdicating a certain amount of power, others noted that this was more complicated in experience than it might seem. When I asked him how he would define a bottom to a heterosexual stranger, David said:

I think it's that offering up my body to another man, both physically and emotionally. It's . . . It's the 'offering up' part, you know. And if it works out really well, then . . . they're doing the same thing, except they're the insertive partner, as opposed to the [receptive]. (David, interview)

Notably, he points out that the top may in fact understand his role as similar to that of the bottom – as also ‘offering up’ their body to their partner. In this way, power for bottoms was often conveyed as not something that one has or does not have, but as constantly in flux and relational. This was most clearly expressed by Nelson, who describes feeling ‘most powerful when I’m actually most vulnerable’:

As a kinky person . . . I feel most powerful when I’m actually most vulnerable. Again going back to the scene I’m looking forward to later on this week, I have a level of trust with the other guy. It’s like, ‘Okay. He could tie me up anywhere and leave me, because I know he’s not gonna let someone come along and start playing with me, or doing what I wouldn’t want to have happened’. Part of that process of surrendering is letting him take care of me. (Nelson, interview)

Allowing his partners to ‘take care of me’ did in fact give his partner a certain level of control over him, and thus might be read simply as power transfer – from one, to the other. However, describing this as being taken care of implies a certain reciprocity, a sense that he is not only giving but also receiving. Stanley – also a self-described submissive bottom – reiterates this idea: ‘You’re being submissive, but at the same time, you have this sort of power over that person, because that person is really enjoying their dominance and they can really only get that if you’re being submissive’ (Stanley, focus group). Thus, these participants understand power as not unidirectional, but bivalent and circuitous. Moreover, power is invoked here for bottoms as a way of controlling their partner’s access to pleasure – highlighting the ways in which power and pleasure can work together to construct a bottom’s relational positionality.

Many participants struggled to put into words this complex flow of power experienced during their sexual encounters as bottoms. For instance, as evidenced previously by Diego’s struggle to come to terms with his desire for receptive anal intercourse, several of the non-white men in the study reported grappling with ethnicity in terms of their bottom identity and its relation to power. For Diego, this struggle was primarily in relation to a particular conception of masculinity that he grew up with in Mexico. For Mike – a 27-year-old born in Indonesia who has lived in San Francisco for 11 years – it was his volition as an Asian man to claim a bottom identity that he felt his white partners had already presumed for him that became a site of concern:

Mike: I’m unsure about my identity as a bottom now as when I first came out. I think I took it uncritically, you know when I first came outta the closet.

Trevor: Why do you think that is, that you took it uncritically?

Mike: I don’t know. I think part of it has to do, I think my experience as a gay man is inflected by my ethnicity. And you know, I’m Asian, and I think there’s this

perception in the gay community that Asians, you're, you've got to be a bottom. And I kinda, I probably, I guess, I don't know. I'm analyzing this, and I don't know if it's true. Perhaps that's why I was comfortable with that. But now I'm not so sure.

For Mike, the uncertainty over whether his self-identification as a bottom is actually a 'true' reflection of his own desires or merely an adaptation to the racialized presumptions of his (typically white) partners is a source of discomfort. In the way that he describes it here, bottom identity was something that was handed to him, not something that he worked actively to construct. Thus, he is clearly linking power to top-bottom relations and racializing that dynamic. By becoming 'critical' of this process, he is struggling to claim a form of agency as sexual actor – a struggle that is complicated by the intersections of race and positional identity. The complexities of this intersection Mike has described reflect scholarship on gay Asian sexuality, such as Richard Fung's (1991) analysis of gay male porn that documents the imbedded, racialized narratives of Asian passivity that are pervasive in the genre, or Ho and Tseng's (2000) qualitative analysis of anal sex and safer sex negotiations among same-sex interracial couples living in Hong Kong that argues that the meanings ascribed to particular sexual practices can be part of political struggles (as it is for Mike).

Jay – a 33-year-old white participant from the Midwest – also struggled to negotiate his identity and relation to power as a self-described 'dominant bottom':

See, I'm the control freak. Like in all aspects of it. I do like it when there's a little bit of a balance. So even though I'm probably a little more in control, I kinda like it when they just do what they wanna do to me. So I think there is a shift in power, in that sense. But I usually still do maintain the power. Does that make sense? (Jay, focus group)

In this quotation, you can see Jay struggling to find the language to explain how he experiences power as a 'dominant bottom'. He refers to himself as a 'control freak', but then says that he likes it 'when they just do what they wanna do to me'. But he likes it when 'there's a little bit of a balance', though he goes on to say that he still does 'maintain the power'. These claims need not be read as contradictions, but rather an expression of a conception of power that is and/both rather than either/or.

Notably, as a dominant bottom Jay did not describe his pleasure as secondary or necessarily relationally dependent on his partners' pleasure. Nor did he perceive receptive anal intercourse as necessarily about a loss of control:

I thoroughly enjoy the feeling... the sensation. And I like the feeling of coming when I'm being penetrated. So, like for me it really is, it's not about letting go, it's purely sexual I think. And when I'm so lucky to fall in love, that emotional and sexual will



bond and mesh together, but right now, because I've been single for so long, it really is just sexual release and desire that I pursue. (Jay, focus group)

Jay enjoys being a bottom first and foremost because 'it feels good' to him, not because it makes his partners feel good. Moreover, he envisions himself as deriving power from his *dominance* as a bottom, not from his submission as previously described by Nelson and others. But the two things are not extricable: he understands himself as in control (a particular conception of power relation) and as having pleasure that is primary and direct – a conception of pleasure relations that is constituted alongside and through his conception of power relations.

The variations described here reflect the complexity and diversity documented in other studies examining gay men's relations to power during anal sex (Kippax and Smith, 2001). But while participants experienced a complex relationship to power in their sexual lives, this conflicted with what they perceived to be the more simplistic understanding of power predominant in the gay community: that tops had the power, and bottoms did not. After a brief discussion in a focus group about this cultural conception, Paul directly questioned the legitimacy of this cultural script. In recounting a conversation that he had at a dinner party, he questions whether bottoms might actually be the ones in control, rather than tops:

In the course of that conversation, I said, as a bottom, if I'm with a top, like in the context of a sexual act, I feel like I actually have more power and control than the top, regardless of the dominant/submissive role, because *I get to define how he's going to get pleasure*, to a certain extent. You know, if I don't want your dick in my mouth, if you're not gonna put your dick in my ass, you're gonna be pretty frustrated tonight. And then all the other tops at that dinner party were like, 'Oh, you're right. Shit'. And they're like, 'Goddamn'. And they were like kinda humiliated because they were like, 'Have bottoms been controlling us all along?' (Paul, focus group, emphasis mine)

As in Stanley's comment before, we can see in Paul's statement the ways in which both power and pleasure operate in tandem to produce his understanding of top–bottom relations. Staking a claim to a bottom's ability to 'define' how his partners 'get pleasure' is to amplify a bottom's power as the person who controls relations of pleasure. The top here is conceived of as the frustrated pleasure-seeker, while the bottom is conceived as having power by virtue of operating as a kind of gatekeeper to that pleasure. While they go beyond the scope of this article, obvious similarities to feminist literatures analyzing heterosexual sex–gender relations are apparent in Paul's narrative (see, for instance, Tolman, 2002).

Paul's attempt to trouble the predominant cultural understanding of bottoms as less powerful was not universal among participants. In fact, several participants understood bottoms as inherently less powerful during sex. However, even participants who understood bottoms to be powerful were not able simply to opt out of

interacting with a community they described as often perceiving them as inherently less powerful and generally 'less than'. Indeed, the impact of this powerful cultural script extended far beyond their bedrooms. For instance, David describes having men in the leather community expecting him to 'wait on tops':

It wasn't until I got involved with the leather community when people started acting like bottoms were less than. Having to wait on tops. In fact, one guy told me to go and get him a beer in front of my boyfriend and I just gave him this look. And he goes, 'Go get me a beer, boy'. And I said, 'I'm a bottom, not a waitress! He was like, 'You'd better teach your boy some manners'. And my boyfriend goes, 'Fuck you'. (David, focus group)

Thus, these scripts not only impact these men's sexual lives, but also bleed into their social interactions with other gay men – though, clearly, this is a contentious relationship (especially in the leather community where many men – Nelson, for instance – seek out such social subordination).

### **Pleasure/risk dilemmas**

Several participants described the sexual scripts documented here as making navigating sexual risk as bottoms difficult at times. For instance, while Greg – a 41-year-old white participant from the East Coast – did not himself particularly subscribe to the scripts laid out in this article, he repeatedly experienced tops attempting to penetrate him without a condom without asking permission, suggesting that his partners saw no reason to ask permission to do so:

They'll start doing it without even telling you. It just really annoyed me, you know? This happened when I was living in the South Bay with this guy that I would fool around with once in a while. You know, he couldn't even get his dick hard and he was trying to... And I was like, 'What the hell are you trying to do?'... Oh, God. And then, it happened to me, when I was in Hawaii, I was in Honolulu, and I know I was thinking that guy was kind of hot. But, it's just like, 'what the hell are you doing?' And he wanted the room all dark, and it was just... that really... you know? And then there was another time when I was down near the peninsula, and this other guy... he wanted to do it, and then [he tried to without a condom, but I stopped him]... then he was almost willing to do it with a condom, but at that point I was just like, 'You know, thanks but no'. (Greg, Interview)

In Greg's story, it seems that his partners assume that the responsibility for initiating condom use was placed squarely on bottoms – a perception shared by other participants. Every time Brian gets tested for HIV, for instance, he makes a promise to himself to refrain from having anonymous unprotected intercourse. However, as a bottom, he finds maintaining this commitment in the face of a deep-seated desire to have his partners ejaculate inside him difficult, at the

very least. This quandary is only exacerbated by his sense that his partners presume the burden of condom initiation falls on the bottom:

I would try, I would say, like, 'We have to. We should'. Or... sometimes, like, even like when it starts, and I was like, kind of like, breathe deeply, 'We've got to get a condom'. Rarely, a guy would be the first one to do it. I still think people – that's my opinion again — I still think that gay people think that the bottom has more... chances of being infected than the top. Which, I do see that a little bit, but I, I feel that the top has the same chances. I'm negative, by the way. Thank God! I just got tested a month ago. And I promise that I never do it again, but, you know... (Brian, interview)

Brian is pointing out here that many gay men are well aware of the disparate risk for HIV that exists between the insertive and receptive partner in anal sex.<sup>4</sup> With this disparate risk potential in mind, Brian feels that his insertive partners are much less inclined to initiate condom use. In a context in which men understand their identities as bottoms as about producing pleasure for their partners and submitting sexually, there seems to be significant potential for what I term 'pleasure/risk dilemmas' – situations in which public health scripts about safer sex come head to head with sexual scripts about pleasure and power.

Understanding the participants in my study who did *not* report difficulty in managing situations like the one described by Brian may prove fruitful in explicating the nature of these situational dilemmas. For instance, Paul – the participant who provided the conceptual framework of bottoms-as-pleasure-producers – reports being able to negotiate productively with a partner who insisted on anal sex without condoms:

One guy was pretty insistent that he doesn't... that he wouldn't be able to maintain an erection if he had to put on a condom. But I said, well then... well then, there's other stuff that we could *do* if you're not gonna fuck me. So then we did other stuff, and then he was like, 'Okay I really want to fuck you. Fine. I'll put on a condom', you know, and then he was like, 'No, I don't like that. So let's just jerk off'. 'Okay'... I mean, I'm pretty clear, which is also why I don't necessarily mess around with drugs, because I know that would impair my judgment and I would probably let someone talk me into a different position, you know? And I wouldn't be happy with it, you know? (Paul, interview)

Faced with a partner pressuring him to have unprotected anal sex, Paul is able to successfully navigate this situation by offering opportunities for pleasure production that do not include anal sex – a strategy likely facilitated by the lack of centrality of anal sex in his conception of the bottom category. Conversely, as we saw in the earlier section on 'using you as a cumdump', it seems clear that anal sex is a central locus for Brian in the way that he understands his sexuality. This centrality would likely make using the kind of

alternative-proposing intervention utilized by Paul difficult or perhaps even unconvivable for Brian. Moreover, as we saw in the earlier referenced conversation at a dinner party, Paul conceives of bottoms as in control of their partner's access to pleasure – a kind of claim to power – whereas Brian's bottom identity was defined by fantasies of objectified vulnerability.

Thus, the meanings and scripts attached to sexuality for these men structure how these men navigate these situations. If anal sex is the central site of meaning-making for one's sexuality, then proposing alternative means for pleasure production would be – sexually speaking – counterproductive; a different set of strategies would be necessary. And if a lack of power is exciting, then taking control of a sexual situation in order to make it safer becomes harder to achieve. Understanding how men conceive of their relations to power and pleasure play a role in how positionally feasible it would be to enact a particular prevention strategy.

## Discussion

The power and pleasure relations that I have described as scripted in gay men's narratives as bottoms may lead some readers towards a 'chicken or the egg' debate: do power and pleasure originate in the top, or in the bottom? But this article need not reveal the 'true' directions in which power or pleasure flow (a very tall order, indeed). One might even go so far as to argue that there may in fact be no 'truth' to discover, other than these scripted narratives. We need not get caught in a quest for some kind of acultural 'truth', but instead read these men's narratives as strategies men use to make sense of their sexual lives as bottoms in terms of both pleasure and power. Thus, if Diego and David both believe that being a bottom is about power transfer, this will have significant implications for the way they interpret their sexual experiences – implications that would be different if they believed anal intercourse had nothing to do with power. In this way, when Paul questions the legitimacy of the culturally prevailing script of bottoms without power, he is not really trying to reveal the 'true' nature of top–bottom relations. Rather, we can understand him as attempting to 'flip the script' and toy with the meanings attributed to sexual intercourse. These scripts are necessarily in a constant state of (re)negotiation and (re)interpretation.

This article should not be read as an attempt to construct a universal theory of bottom identity. Jay's narrative and 'flipped' scripts about bottoms reveal a necessary multiplicity of realities experienced by men who identify with this broad category. Resistance to these dominant scripts (as well as alternative conceptions) is sure to exist alongside the stories I have presented here. Further, these scripts need not be read as necessarily in *opposition* to the scripts associated with tops. While bottoms may indeed want to provide pleasure for their partners, and while that may be an important component of how they understand what being a bottom means, top-identified men may or may not understand their own identities in complementary ways. And they may see bottoms either the

same way that bottoms see themselves or very differently. A similar project exploring top identity would be necessary to explore these issues, but it would likely support the idea that we need not conceive as top/bottom identities as oppositional or mutually exclusive for them to be relational in nature.

But while these scripts are dynamic in nature, this should not discourage future research aimed at broadening our understanding of these complicated and potentially contradictory scripts. Notably, gender is largely absent from the analysis presented here. As mentioned in the introduction, this was a strategic choice: I wanted to explore the possibilities for interpreting a category so centrally connected discursively to ‘receptive’ sex without de facto relying on gender to do the work of explaining a bottom’s experienced positionality. For instance, although some readers may argue that the very concept of relational pleasure described in this article is itself linked to femininity, this seems to me to ignore the fact that many heterosexual masculinities place great value on their female partner’s pleasure (and great shame on the failure to achieve that outcome). The analytic potential of the ‘bottom’ category described here among gay men for thinking about sex, in my mind, is that it facilitates a suspension of the dogmatic assumption implicit in some feminist analyses of sex that automatically interpret power and pleasure disparities between inserter and insertee as always-already a product of gender inequality and of a masculine–feminine dichotomy – an assumption that seems entirely *obvious* and *natural* when examining heterosexual relations between men and women. This does not mean that I believe gender is absent from these men’s narratives (close readers may have noted its occasional presence) but I wanted here to attempt an exploration that did not begin with that assumption.

Further, understanding the ways in which socio-sexual positionalities (such as the bottom positional identity described here) may serve as schema that could potentially hinder *or facilitate* an individual’s efforts to maintain safer sex commitments during situations like those described earlier is a reasonable point of departure for future studies. From there, Public Health scholars can begin to explore the development of intervention approaches that take these social dilemmas as a central problematic. Simply telling men to try harder to use a condom is unlikely to be effective in many instances, since the problem may be rooted in the relational and positional contexts in which these men are having sex – rather than their decision-making processes. Indeed, providing men with a set of potentially useful, sociologically-informed strategies for intervening in these scenarios may prove to be a more fruitful strategy than blanket ‘use a condom every time’ approaches that ignore context and therefore lack utility.

What I mean here by ‘strategies’ is purposefully open to interpretation, as an approach developed for one community is unlikely to translate perfectly to another. Generally, I mean to say that Public Health practitioners should take seriously the socio-sexual scripts and systems of meaning operating within the communities in which they work, and aim to develop intervention strategies that are attuned to – and conceptualized as working *with* – these constructions

of sexuality. Within a scripting framework, these possibilities can emerge both in (1) commonly described situations where men are struggling to find a new language – thus, offering new scripts where before there were none or high levels of ambiguity (such as those described in the ‘anal orgasm’ section) – as well as (2) those situations in which men describe facing difficulty negotiating scripts already in operation – thus, producing alternatives to scripts that already exist. In the scenarios described here, for instance, providing gay men with a set of possible alternative responses (e.g. scripts) to partners who are pressuring them to have unprotected sex could serve as a kind of interpersonal script ‘toolkit’.

Following in the footsteps of important contributions from sociologists such as Adam Green, Barry Adam, and Gary Dowsett, what I am calling for here is a sociology *for* gay men’s health – a practically oriented approach that takes care to situate gay men’s socio-sexual practices, cultures, and identities within larger structural frameworks – including not just formal institutions such as the state, but also ‘structured’ social phenomena like the sexual scripts documented in this article. The responsibility for HIV infection has for far too long been placed squarely on the often-pathologized psychology of gay men. Socio-cultural inquiries can provide tools for resisting these discourses by resituating these men as social actors operating within social contexts that inform and constrain their behaviors. Such a sociological literature should be aimed – at least in part – at informing more nuanced health practices that are meaningfully relevant to the lives of gay men.

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### **Notes**

1. We may even take this metaphor further. For instance, pitchers and catchers are on the same team in baseball, which implies they are both after the same ultimate end, but have different strategies to facilitate that end. It is not a competitive relation that is implied in this metaphor, but a collaborative one.

2. For an extended discussion of this description of ‘virtual’ structure, see Sewell’s (1992) lengthy digestion of Giddens’ theory of structuration cited earlier in the article, in particular pp. 5–9.
3. The pleasure produced from receptive anal sex described here by Paul and David is often clinically explained by stimulation of the prostate organ. However, it is also important to allow for a kind of mental, psychological pleasure experienced here that is not as tangibly embodied – as noted by sexologist Jack Morin in his ‘guidebook’, *Anal Pleasure and Health*: ‘The psychological enjoyment of rectal receptivity can greatly heighten all pleasurable sensations. And for men, stimulation of the prostate through the front of the rectal wall provides another set of potentially wonderful sensations’ (Morin, 1998: 106). Distinguishing between the two would be impossible.
4. For instance, aggregate data (Vittinghoff et al., 1999) suggests that in a singular condomless sexual encounter between serodiscordant couples, if the insertive partner is HIV-positive and the receptive partner HIV-negative, the theoretical risk for receptive HIV-negative partners from that one encounter is roughly 1:122. In the reverse scenario – if the insertive partner is HIV-negative and receptive partner is HIV-positive – the theoretical risk for HIV-negative insertive partners is about 1:1,250. Thus, there appears to be approximately a factor of 10 risk differential between insertive and receptive partners.

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**Trevor Hoppe** is currently working towards his PhD in the Joint Program in Sociology and Women’s Studies at the University of Michigan, where he is also working towards his Masters in Public Health. He holds a Masters degree in Sexuality Studies from San Francisco State University, where he completed a thesis examining the way that young, HIV-negative gay men related to and understood the HIV epidemic and HIV risk. He is interested in gay men’s health, HIV/AIDS risk, and the social dimensions of the epidemic. He edited a 2008 collection of 20 original essays, titled *Beyond Masculinity: Essays by Queer Men on Gender and Politics*, which can be accessed online at [beyondmasculinity.com](http://beyondmasculinity.com)